

I'M NOT THE HERO!



WRITTEN BY
USBER

ILLUSTRATION BY
HANA AMANO



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02



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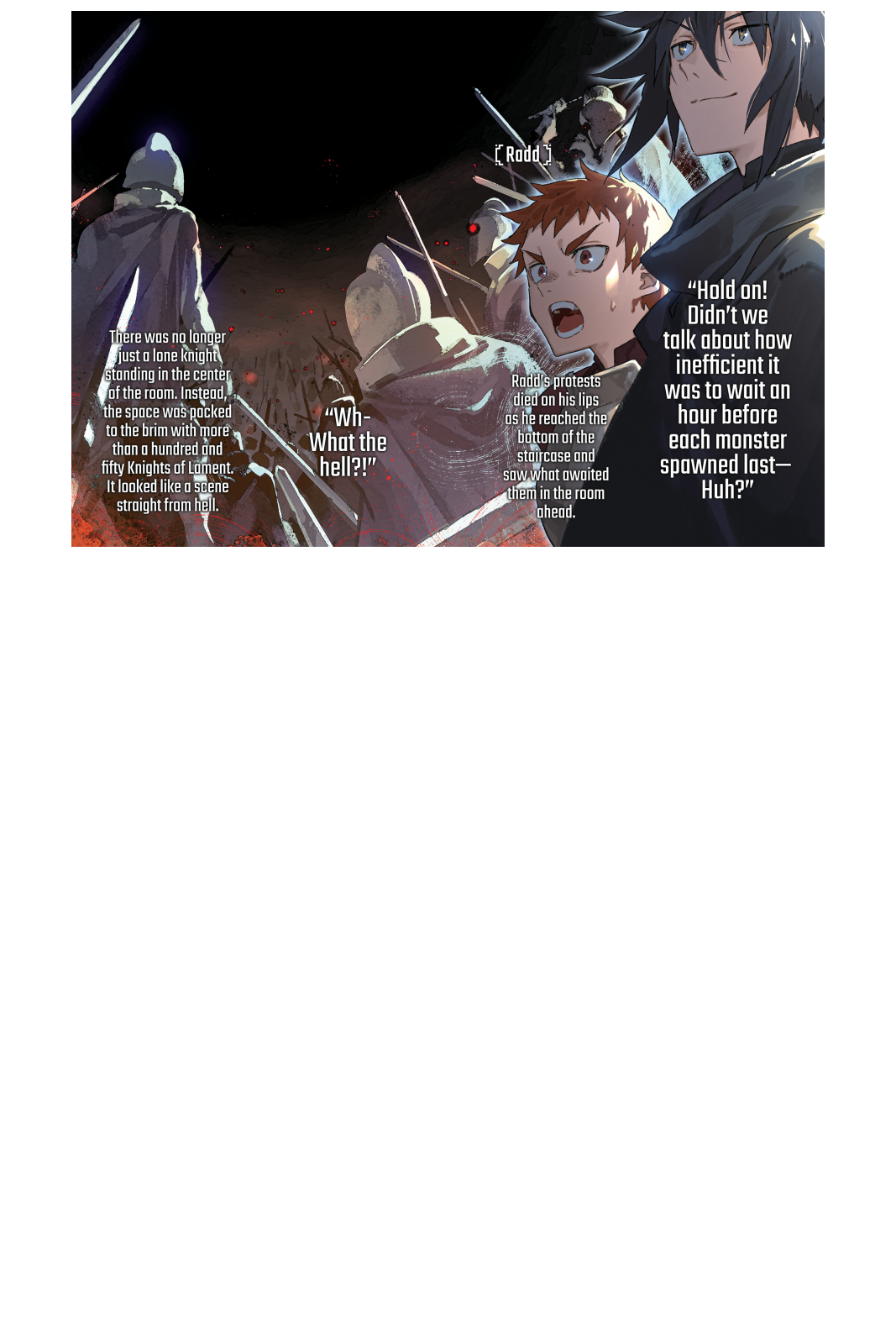
[Recilio]

"This is
why I said
you should
have refused
that girl's
request."

[Rex]

"No, I think
I made the
right choice.
That was a
pretty valuable
experience for me—
I learned a lot."





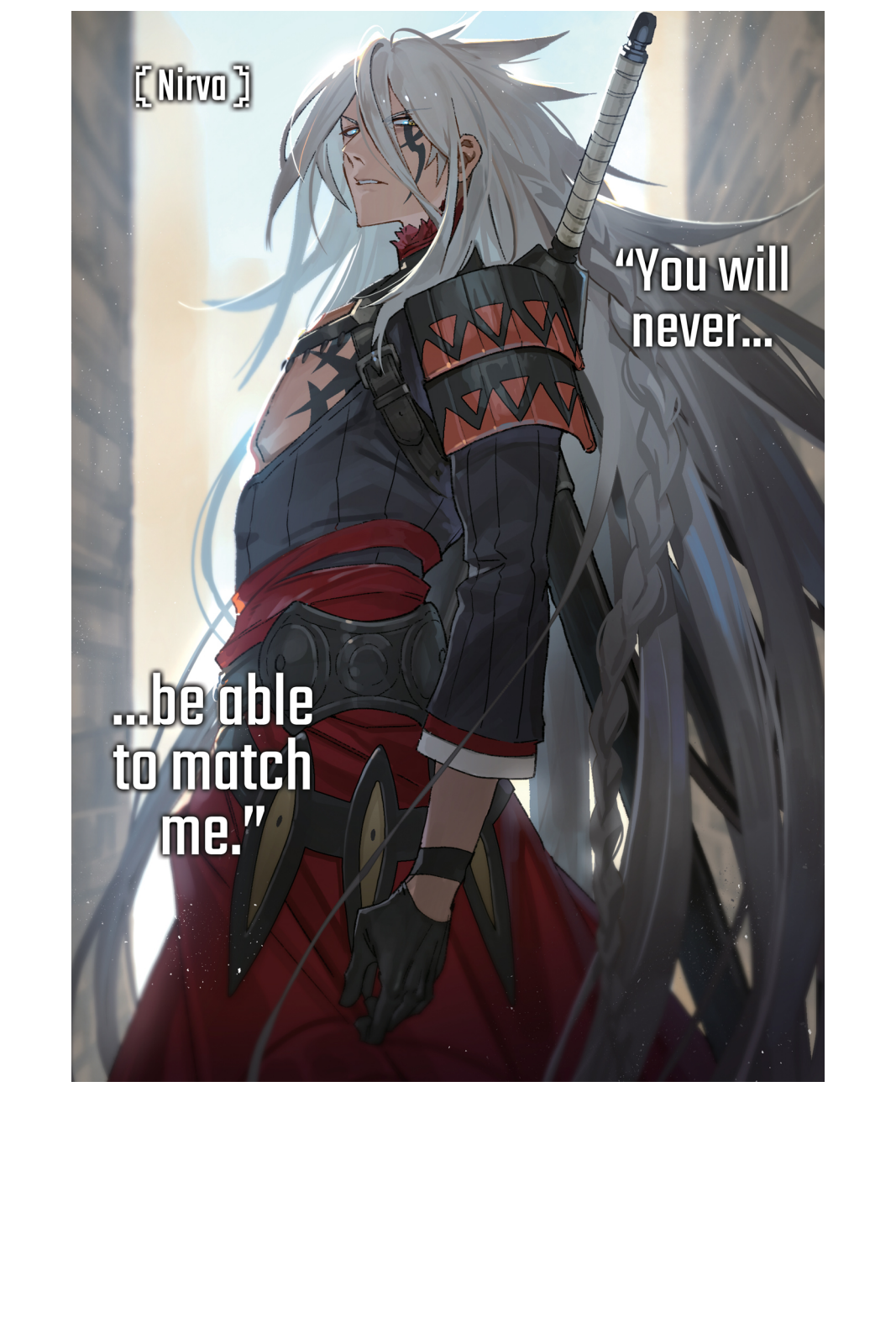
There was no longer just a lone knight standing in the center of the room. Instead, the space was packed to the brim with more than a hundred and fifty Knights of Lament. It looked like a scene straight from hell.

“Wh-
What the
hell?!”

[Radd]

Radd's protests died on his lips as he reached the bottom of the staircase and saw what awaited them in the room ahead.

“Hold on!
Didn't we
talk about how
inefficient it
was to wait an
hour before
each monster
spawned last—
Huh?”

A character with long, flowing white hair and a black eye under the right eye. They are wearing a dark blue, long-sleeved tunic with red accents and a red sash. A sword is visible on their back. The background is a bright, hazy sky with some architectural elements.

[Nirvo]

"You will
never..."

...be able
to match
me."

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STAGE 2

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Prologue

“Holy shit, that place is huge!” Radd shouted, eyes wide as he looked up at the massive building in front of us.

“R-Radd, pipe down!” Nyuuk stuttered, trying to reel in his party mate’s excitement. “You’re so embarrassing!”

I was standing with the two boys, along with Prana and Mana, in front of Freelea’s one and only coliseum. It was cylindrical in shape, and wasn’t too tall in comparison with the other buildings surrounding it, but it made up for its short stature with considerable girth. The building spanned such a massive space it practically dwarfed everything around it.

Beyond being Freelea’s identifying feature, the coliseum was also a relic from the time the gods had still roamed the world of *BB*. It married form with function, and was enchanted so that people could duel one another without having to worry about accidentally killing their opponent—as long as they operated under the coliseum’s rules and conditions, of course.

As such, tournaments were frequently held in the coliseum, the most important of which being those that determined the world’s strongest fighter. These were held in the sixth and twelfth months of every year, and were famous enough that even non-adventurers came to participate. Indeed, famous NPCs from all over the world showed up.

All this meant that participating in one of these tournaments was a great opportunity to face off against enemies you’d never otherwise be able to fight, as well as rack up some prize money—if you ranked well, the payout was insane. Most importantly though, there were a few skills you could only learn if you became champion of the coliseum. It was one of the most important facilities for training up your characters.

Tournaments weren’t where the coliseum’s usefulness came to an end, however. On days when they weren’t being held, you could apply to hold a private mock battle between your party and someone else’s. These mock battles didn’t give participants any experience, but they were useful for testing out various skill loadouts and checking the versatility of your character’s builds.

Radd tore his eyes from the coliseum building, looking at the rather impressive statue standing in front of its entrance instead. “Is

this guy a former champion?" he asked, rapping his knuckles against the statue's base. "He looks so cool..."

"That's right!" Mana chimed in excitedly. "Not only was he a champion, he was the first one ever! Plus, he retired with a perfect record, having never lost a single bout in the entire thirty years he participated in tournaments! The coliseum's current champion is actually a direct descendant of his."

"You sure know your stuff, Mana," I said with a wry smile.

I guess it's pretty on-brand for her to know all about the coliseum's history, since she's an adventurer nut and all.

Blushing, Mana twined her fingers together. "Um, actually... I only know that because I read the tourist brochure for this city..."

What are you, some country bumpkin? I thought, exasperated and a little amused. *I guess I can't really blame her, though—I did the same thing when I went to go visit the Tokyo Dome for the first time. Maaan, so much has happened since then.*

You see, everything had changed for me a while back, when I'd leapt into action to save a girl from being hit by an oncoming car. I'd ended up dying, gotten reincarnated into this world—i.e, that of the video game *Braves and Blades*—and even dueled against the first of the Demon Lords, Bring. To be clear, that last task was *supposed* to be the protagonist's job.

No way in hell am I doing something like that again.

I mean, sure, I wanted to get stronger if I could, but I had absolutely no desire to fight against even more dangerous opponents. I didn't have the hot-blooded force of will shonen manga protagonists always had, and frankly, dying once had been enough for me.

Which is exactly why I need to train these four up to fight the big battles in my stead!

I wasn't entirely heartless—I did feel a little bad about using Radd and his friends to further my own goals. However, I comforted myself with the thought that they were getting something out of it as well.

All that said, I'd landed on the coliseum as the next phase of the kids' training.

"Let's get going," I said, looking down at the four of them. "The match is about to start. Feel free to take in the sights, but don't forget the real reason we're here."

"Uuuwooooooh!"

"DIE!!!"

As the five of us watched, two men clad in full armor duked it out in the fighting ring below us. Fierce shouts and the clangs of metal meeting metal rang out across the massive arena, melding with the

heavy scraping of metal boots against stone floor.

“Steelsplitter!”

“Rock Crash!”

As I’d noted at the beginning of the battle, one of the fighters was using a greatsword, while the other was equipped with an axe. Sparks flew as the two weapons slammed together once more, the shock wave of the collision whipping up a gust of hot wind. We had front row seats to the action, so we could see it all in perfect detail.

“Holy shit...” Radd muttered as he watched the heated battle.

The kid was on the edge of his seat, so engrossed in what was going on down below that he probably wouldn’t even notice if I called out to him. Looking at his other party members, it was clear he was the most into these kinds of hot-blooded fights.

“Nrgh! Axe Flash!”

“Indomitable Will!”

These sort of back-and-forth exchanges continued for what seemed like an eternity, but the battle did eventually reach a conclusion when the fighter with the greatsword used a defensive Art to take one of the axe-wielder’s Arts head-on.

“Wha—?!” The axe-wielder called out, left wide open due to the other fighter’s parry.

“You’re done for!” the fighter with the greatsword cried triumphantly. He slammed his weapon into the axe-wielder’s shoulder, shouting: “Beastcutter!”

“AGH!”

The axe-wielder dropped to his knees, then was summarily cast from the arena by the enchantment cast over the fighting ring. The remaining fighter stared down at his weapon, panting heavily.

“Aaaaaand the winner is Archibald!” the announcer shouted.

The fighter with the greatsword thrust his weapon into the air, letting out a triumphant roar. Mere seconds later, the watching crowd burst into cheers as well.

“So this is what a coliseum tournament looks like...” Radd mumbled under his breath, completely entranced.

“This is just the start, actually,” I told him with a playful grin.

“Wh-What does that mean?” Radd asked, giving me a confused look.

My lips stretched wider. The bout we’d just witnessed had been the last match in a regular tournament that was held once a month; sure, it had been impressive enough—it *had* been the final round, after all—but at the end of the day, the stakes had been pretty lackluster.

“Compared to this one, the tournament you guys are going to enter is going to have a way bigger crowd, and powerful competitors coming from everywhere you could possibly imagine. You won’t be

competing for some monthly title—you'll be competing to be the strongest fighter in the world. The two guys you saw fight just now wouldn't even make it past the first round."

Today's goal was simple: to give Radd, Prana, Nyuuk, and Mana a taste of what the coliseum's tournaments were like. The big tournament that I'd decided would serve as the next portion of the kids' training program wouldn't be held until a month from now.

"Old man..." Radd gave me a hesitant look.

"What's wrong?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "Don't tell me you're getting cold feet."

I'd been purposely trying to rile him up, and it worked like a charm. Radd shook his head vehemently.

"H-Hell no, I'm not! B-But...can we really hold our own in a fight against guys like that?"

Radd glanced over his shoulder at his party members. They were looking just as uneasy as him.

"Don't worry," I said, waving off their dismay. "You guys've got a whole month to prepare. If you follow my training regimen, you'll be able to blast through them no problem."

I fell silent, waiting for Radd to protest a bit further, but was pleasantly surprised when he didn't.

I guess they're finally starting to trust me a little, I thought, heart softening. But, happy as that makes me, I still owe them a bit more of an explanation.

"Those two who were just in the ring probably seemed really strong to you, huh?" I asked the kids, using Analyze on the beefy axeman as I spoke. "But...they actually had a few glaring weaknesses."

【Sokko】

LV: 32

HP: 424

MP: 121

Strength: 128 (C-)

Vitality: 165 (C)

Intelligence: 74 (D)

Mind: 165 (C)

Agility: 222 (C+)

Focus: 111 (C-)

I knew it, I thought, writing down his stats and showing them to Radd and the others.

"The axeman is level 32, which is pretty high, all things considered. That level is only a little lower than Veteran's, so it's safe to say he'd rank among the best adventurers in the city. But, as you

can see, he's got some issues when it comes to his stats." I pointed to the man's Strength and Agility stats. "He's clearly a melee class of some sort, but he's only got 128 points in Strength. His Agility, meanwhile, is a whopping 222. He's clearly in the wrong class for his stat spread."

"He should have picked a rogue class instead, right?" Prana muttered from behind Radd.

I nodded. "That's right."

It wasn't that surprising of a predicament—for whatever reason, *Braves and Blades* assigned people in this world with completely random default classes, irrespective of what their innate growth rates were. There were tons of adventurers out there who were Warriors despite having naturally high Intelligence, and vice versa.

"Now, let's take a look at the guy who won."

I looked over at the swordsman, who was still basking in the cheers of the crowd, and used Analyze.

【Archibald】

LV: 31

HP: 418

MP: 190

Strength: 180 (C+)

Vitality: 163 (C)

Intelligence: 144 (C)

Mind: 127 (C-)

Agility: 72 (D)

Focus: 163 (C)

Archibald's stat spread was better than Sokko's, but his Agility was downright abysmal. In the long run, that wouldn't be such a big deal, since Agility gave diminishing returns, but at the current moment it wasn't so great.

"He's only got 72 points in Agility," I pointed out to Radd and the others. "I told you guys before that Agility is a trap stat, and there's not much point in raising it past 150, but on the flip side, it's actually the stat that gives you the greatest return on your investment until you get it to around 100. Archibald should've altered his equipment loadout to give him enough bonus points in Agility to bump him over 100, but he didn't, so..."

"So that's why his attacks were so slow," Prana muttered, finishing my thought.

I nodded, pleased. Prana might not talk very often, but as the party's Scout, I'd discovered she was quite perceptive. No one in Radd's party was better at analyzing people's capabilities than her.

“That axeman’s skills might have looked flashy,” I continued, “but they were lacking in terms of power. The guy with the greatsword, meanwhile, had powerful attacks, but they were all slow. That match only lasted as long as it did because both fighters had such glaring deficiencies in their builds. They’re both of the same level, so all it would have taken to give one of them a decisive advantage against the other was to choose a class that was more suited to their stat spread.”

Good thing Radd and the others don’t have to worry about that sort of thing, I thought with a grin. Thanks to my sage guidance, they’ve all got ideal stat spreads for their classes.

Just to prove it, I turned and Analyzed Radd.

【Radd】

LV: 11

HP: 304

MP: 74

Strength: 132 (C-)

Vitality: 126 (C-)

Intelligence: 48 (D-)

Mind: 94 (D+)

Agility: 85 (D+)

Focus: 69 (D)

I know it was part of my plan, but I still can’t believe he went all the way from level 4 to level 11 in just one dungeon, I thought gleefully. It’s absolutely insane.

After our excursion to the Rainbow Lava Caverns yesterday, Mana’s level had gone up to 10, while Prana, Radd, and Nyuuk’s had hit 11. I’d figured they wouldn’t quite reach level 10 before they completed the dungeon, but it seemed the experience they’d gotten from killing the Huge Rainbow Slime had pushed them over the edge.

In addition, I was quite pleased with their stat gains. Since I’d gotten them all to use equipment that gave them stat bonuses on level up and had them switch to higher-tier classes before they’d gone into the dungeon, their stats had increased far more than your typical adventurer’s would have. That much was clear just by comparing their stats to Archibald’s and Sokko’s. Radd was twenty levels under both of them, but he had more Strength than Sokko and more Agility than Archibald. By the time he reached level 30, he would be miles ahead of both of them.

“All that said,” I continued, “it’s obviously not going to be easy for you guys to rank in the upcoming tournament. Your levels are too low, and your proficiency in your classes is pretty minuscule as well.”

Sure, Radd and the others might have gone up seven levels just by

completing a single dungeon, but an adventurer's level wasn't everything. Their stats had gone up, but they'd only gotten a limited amount of class proficiency from the number of enemies they'd defeated. Most importantly, they hadn't learned most of the fundamental skills and Arts they needed to put up a good fight in the arena. Archibald had clinched his win by using a skill called Indomitable Will to increase his defenses, but Radd wouldn't even be able to learn that skill until he spent a lot more time fighting in his current class.

The road ahead of the kids was a long and arduous one. But if they managed to stay the course, and overcome the many obstacles bound to pop up in their paths, then eventually they'd become so overpowered they'd put isekai protagonists to shame.

"Still," I said firmly, "I truly believe one of you guys can win this thing."

Radd's whole body went stiff. "Y-You think one of us could become the strongest fighter in the world...?"

"Yeah. B-But, umm..." I paused, debating over how I wanted to word my next point. "Well, even if you *do* win, that doesn't technically make you the strongest fighter in the world. Actually, coming in first place isn't even the true end of the tournament. You'll still have to fight an exhibition match against the tournament's previous champion, and if you beat him, *then* you'll be able to call yourself the strongest fighter in the world. But—"

"Is the winner of the last tournament really that strong?" Radd cut in, brimming with innocent curiosity.

I let out a long sigh. "You remember that statue we saw at the coliseum's entrance?"

"Yeah, it was of that guy Mana knew a ton about! He was the undefeated champion for decades or something, right?"

I nodded. "Exactly. And right now, his distant descendant is the current champion of the coliseum." I frowned a little before continuing. "His name is Nirva, and he's known as the Invincible Blademaster. Ever since he appeared a few years ago, he hasn't lost a single fight—he is quite literally the strongest swordsman in the world."

"Yeeeeeaaah!" Radd shouted, pumping his fist into the air. "I'm totally pumped now! I'm gonna do ten thousand practice swings as soon as I get back to the Guild!"

I smiled a little, watching as an exasperated Nyuuk stepped forward to try and calm his party mate down. Now that the tournament had ended, we were all on our way back to Guild.

I was all worried over whether or not I should have them participate in such a big tournament, but I seem to have done a good job of getting them all motivated for this next stage of their training, I mused, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Are you sure you don’t want to enter the tournament yourself, brother?” A feminine voice whispered into my ear.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, a shiver going all the way down my spine. “D-Don’t surprise me like that, Recilia.”

Recilia was Rex’s younger sister, but now that I was inhabiting his body, she was technically my sister too. She also just so happened to be the only person who knew I’d been reincarnated into this world. In *Braves and Blades* the game, she normally died right in the beginning, but I’d managed to rescue her and keep her alive.

“Hmm,” she continued consideringly. “Are you trying to restrain yourself from fighting in order to give Radd and the others a chance to shine, perhaps?”

“N-Nah, that’s not it,” I stammered. I meant it too—for once, Recilia was completely off the mark. “As much as it hurts me to admit, the reason I’m not joining them in the tournament is because, no matter how hard I try, I won’t be able to win.”

“You mean the tournament, or...”

“Against Nirva.” I gritted my teeth as I said his name. Just thinking about him was painful.

“Is he truly that strong?” Recilia asked, looking doubtful.

I don’t know if I should answer that... I thought. But I guess I can tell Recilia, of all people.

My hesitation was, of course, because my first encounter with Nirva had been as a player of *BB*. In the game, he truly had been the strongest fighter—not just in the coliseum, but probably in the entire world of *Braves and Blades*.

“The first time I won one of these big tournaments in-game,” I finally replied, “my character was way stronger than Rex is right now. That version of me could have won today’s tournament without even breaking a sweat. That character won the big tournament pretty handily too, and I made sure they were fully prepared to face off against the Invincible Blademaster when the fight triggered. But—”

“But you still couldn’t beat him?” Recilia asked.

I nodded reluctantly. “Forget winning, I couldn’t even put up a fight. He wiped the floor with me in a matter of seconds.”

“R-Really?” In a rare show of emotion, Recilia’s eyes widened.

I could still remember the battle against Nirva as clear as day. At the start of the fight, I’d thrown out an Air Slash just to test the waters. I’d wanted to see how he responded to a ranged attack like that, so I could decide on my strategy from there. But right after I’d

activated the Art, I'd heard Nirva call out "Flash Cutter!" and before I knew it, I'd taken enough damage that I'd been thrown out of the ring. I'd never even heard of an Art by that name before that moment.

"I had the best stats, skills, and equipment it was possible to get by that point in the game," I continued, "and I still didn't last two seconds against him. If I fought him as I am now, I know for a fact I'll lose ten times out of ten. That's why I'm not even bothering to enter this time around."

It wasn't that I didn't want to beat Nirva—if I was honest with myself, I desperately wanted to trounce him and claim victory over the upcoming tournament. It was just that, no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't think of any way for me to beat him at my current state.

"Anyway, I figure I'll pin all my hopes on those kids... Hmm?"

I blinked in surprise at the now unmoving forms of Radd, Prana, Nyuuk, and Mana. They'd been walking a short distance ahead of me and Recilia, but now they'd stopped in the middle of the street. There was someone I didn't recognize next to them.

Is someone trying to pick a fight with them or something? I wondered. *Maybe they think Radd and the others cheated their way through the dungeon yesterday?*

I walked a few steps closer, then quickly realized that the newcomer wasn't antagonistic. She was a young adventurer, probably only a few years older than Radd and his crew, and despite the sharp look in her eyes, it was clear she wasn't trying to use her seniority to intimidate them. If anything, they were the ones doing the intimidating.

Judging by that equipment, that girl's probably around level 10 or so, I calculated.

Her armor wasn't quite skimpy enough to be called bikini armor, but it was still plenty revealing. It was the kind of impractical leather armor you'd only ever find swordswomen wearing in fiction.

Mana said a faint "Oh..." turning to look at me once she sensed my approach. The girl, who had been speaking to Radd, followed Mana's gaze. After a moment's hesitation, she ran over to me.

"S-So, you're the guy Radd was talking about?" the girl asked in a rush. "Oh, please forgive me for my poor manners! You're Lord Rex, the A-rank adventurer, correct?"

"That's me, yes..." I agreed weakly.

She's definitely not used to speaking in such a formal way, but I guess she's trying her best...?

All of a sudden, the girl bowed her head, completely ignoring the fact that we were in the middle of a busy street. "I beg of you, Lord Rex! Please, teach me where my talents lie!"

Chapter 1: Aptitude

“M-My bad, Mast—err, old man!” Radd stammered, bowing his head apologetically. “I accidentally let it slip that you could see a person’s aptitude.”

Apparently Magey, the girl who’d suddenly come up to me, knew Radd from before he’d become an adventurer. She’d heard the unsavory rumors that had been flying around about me a while back, and had gone to Radd and warned him not to let me train him. In response, Radd had told her a bunch of stuff about me to reassure her.

“Umm, I’m an idiot, so I didn’t believe what Radd said back then, but...” Magey trailed off.

Ah, I see where this is going. Now that I’ve defeated a Demon Lord, everybody sees me in a new light, huh?

I’d told everyone at the Guild that I’d only managed to defeat Demon Lord Bring with the help of Veteram and his friends in the hope that I’d be able to keep out of the spotlight, but it hadn’t seemed to help too much. Even though only a day had passed, most of the adventurers’ opinions of me had done a total one-eighty. Magey was likely a part of that crowd.

“Radd and his friends were able to beat the boss of the Rainbow Lava Caverns thanks to your guidance, right?” she asked tentatively. “I can see now why Radd said you were the best teacher in Freelea.”

“Hey, you don’t have to mention that part!” Radd exclaimed, his face flushing.

My lips twitched. *Honestly, the fact that she outed Radd makes me trust her more...*

I turned to look at Radd’s cranky face. “I see, so that’s what you said about me...” I drawled.

Radd’s lips screwed up into a pout. “S-So what?” he stammered. “You got a problem with that?”

I lifted a hand over my mouth, trying to hide my amusement. It was nice to know Radd believed in me, but if I kept messing with him he’d get mad for real.

“I’ve been adventuring with my current party for two years, but we’ve made barely any progress,” Magey continued, cutting off my conversation with Radd. “We actually went to the Rainbow Lava Caverns recently, but we had to retreat. It was like the enemies were impossible for us to beat.”

“So you decided to come to me for help?” I asked.

Magey hurriedly waved a hand in denial. “Oh no, I’m fully aware I don’t have the right to ask you to mentor me like you’re doing for Radd. I... I know how unreasonable I’m being asking you to help me at all! I just want to know where my talents lie, at the very least. My current class is Fighter, but something about it doesn’t feel right to me. I’ve actually swapped around a bunch of times, and I’ve never been able to figure out what class truly fits me.” Magey bit her lip in vexation, then bowed to me again. “So please, can you at least tell me what my natural talents are, or if I even have any to begin with? That’s all I ask! If you tell me I’m hopeless, I’ll give up on being an adventurer, but I have to know!”

She’s pretty desperate, I thought with a sigh. I guess I might as well use Analyze on her.

【Magey】

LV: 11

HP: 160

MP: 93

Strength: 61 (D)

Vitality: 54 (D)

Intelligence: 67 (D)

Mind: 70 (D)

Agility: 58 (D)

Focus: 74 (D)

Hmm, I thought. All of her stats are D-rank.

In other words, Magey’s stat spread was roughly equal across the board. It was odd, since she’d said she was currently a Fighter, which was a melee class. Her Strength, Vitality, and Agility were all too low for a class of that type.

Most likely her class just doesn’t suit her innate growth rates, I mused, but I’m not completely certain that’s it.

After all, while Analyze could show you a person’s current stats, it couldn’t show you their innate growth rates. I’d only been able to figure out what Radd and the others’ growth rates were by calculating back from their current stats, and there was always the possibility that I’d made an arithmetic mistake here or there. Regardless, that technique wouldn’t work on Magey, since she’d changed classes multiple times. I *could* check her stats a second time once she’d leveled up again, and calculate from there, but it would likely take her quite some time to go up another level.

“Brother,” Recilia whispered into my ear, “there’s nothing in this for you. You’ll just be using up your extra time calculating her growth

rates. You should probably just refuse her...”

She has a point, I admitted silently. But I’d already made up my mind.

“Sure, I can do that,” I said to Magey.

“Really?! You’ll really do that for me?!” she gasped, her eyes wide and stunned.

I couldn’t help but be amused. Despite Magey being the one who’d asked me for the favor, she seemed to be the one most shocked by my affirmative response.

“Yeah, I don’t mind,” I said with a shrug. “But I can’t do it here. Follow me.”

“C-Coming!” Magey shouted, tripping after me.

I grinned to myself. *She’ll be the perfect test case*, I decided.

I’d thought it would be a while before I could fully launch my plans, since I needed to find more people interested in being mentored by me, but it seemed a chance had presented itself sooner than I’d expected.

I’ll be able to speed everything up now.

“We’re heading to the coliseum,” I called over my shoulder, “so it’ll be a bit of a walk.”

I caught a glimpse of the scene behind me—for some reason, it seemed Radd and the others were tagging along as well. I thought about telling them to get back to their training, but then decided against it.

“Are you sure about this, brother?” Recilia asked quietly. “That girl might tell even more people about your abilities.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure Veteram’s spread a hundred stories about me already, so it’s too late to worry about concealing things now.”

Recilia furrowed her brow. “I need to keep an eye on you, or you’ll do something stupid again...” she muttered quietly to herself.

I snorted. *You really don’t need to worry that much about me.*

“It’s fine,” I told her, sending her a reassuring smile. “This is all part of my plan.”

“It is...?”

“Most of the adventurers in this world are far too weak,” I explained. “So...I’m going to usher in a new age of adventuring. Besides, there’s more to fighting than just going to dungeons and killing monsters. Let me show you the smart way to fight.”

Recilia considered this, her eyes darting away as she sunk deep into thought. The sight made me feel a little guilty, since I wasn’t actually going to be doing anything particularly special. I’d just thought that if I got all dramatic about it, my plan would seem more thought out than it actually was.

Trying my best to look confident, I continued my walk back to the



“Are you ready, Magey?”

“Y-Yes!”

Well, she's clearly nervous, but there's not much I can do to help her relax, I thought with a sigh. Might as well just get started.

I urged Magey into the arena. “In order to investigate your aptitude, there's something I need you to do for me,” I told her.

“Wh-What's that?”

I chuckled. “Don't worry, it's not hard. I just need you to get up onto the fighting ring and stand still. Oh and...” I trailed off, looking over Magey's equipment. From what I could tell, she wasn't wearing anything that changed her stats, but it was possible some of gear could be enchanted. Just in case, I added, “I'll need you to take off all your equipment.”

Magey twitched, and her face went pale. “O-Okay, if...if you insist,” she said weakly.

She must have decided there's no point in protesting now that she's come this far, I thought.

I watched as Magey nodded to herself, appearing to harden her resolve, then stalked off toward the fighting ring.

She's acting a bit strange, I realized. Does she think I'm going to beat her up once she takes her equipment off or something? Ah well, once she gets into the ring, whatever misunderstanding she's laboring under will be resolved.

Or so I thought.

But, just as I was about to head into the ring myself, Radd shouted, “Y-You're despicable, you old geezer!”

I turned back around in confusion. “Huh?”

Radd looked absolutely livid. Nyuuk looked disappointed as well, and Prana was giving me a withering glare. Only Mana didn't seem angry, and she gave her comrades a confused look.

Recilia was the last one I saw. She walked up to me and asked in a disdainful voice, “Is *this* what you meant when you said you'd show me what the ‘smart way’ to fight is?”

It was only then that I finally realized what everyone thought I was about to do to Magey.

You see, in *BB*, the equipment a character was wearing would be fully represented on their model. Some particularly fancy pieces of equipment changed the outfit underneath a character's armor as well. In-game, that had just been a neat way to showcase a character's loadout, but I hadn't realized how a system like that would function once ported into a real world.

For some pieces of equipment, the clothing the person was wearing underneath—possibly even the underwear—might count as a part of the item. In which case... Well, it was pretty obvious what would happen if someone took all their equipment off.

This time it was me who went pale. “O-Oh...” I stammered.

I only felt worse when I thought of how things must have sounded from Magey’s perspective. I mean, I’d gone up to the girl and said, “There’s something I need you to do for me,” and essentially ordered her to strip naked and stand in the center of the fighting ring. The way I’d phrased things had *clearly* been a mistake.

“W-Wait, you guys have it all wrong! It’s not what you think!”

I hurriedly ran over to Magey, who was in the process of stripping down completely, and explained what I’d actually meant.

Once things had calmed down, I’d managed to resolve the misunderstanding that had originated from my mistaken conception of what counted as equipment, though it had taken longer than I’d liked. Recilia and the others still seemed a little suspicious of me, but the more I professed my innocence, the worse I was going to look at this point.

I really shouldn’t have dragged her to the coliseum without any preparation, I thought, wincing.

In the end, I had Magey come back out of the fighting ring, found her a change of clothes, and then asked her to go to the church to switch classes while I made some preparations of my own.

You see, there were a number of fighting rings in Freelea’s coliseum. The one we’d borrowed to practice in was one of the smaller ones that had been used for some of the preliminary matches in today’s tournament.

But, small or not, our fighting ring had been created by a god, as had all the others. That meant that each one had a number of special effects, including but not limited to making sure people didn’t die even when their HP reached zero. For example, anyone who borrowed a fighting ring could summon a phantom of any of the monsters that had been registered with the coliseum, so that the ring’s users could fight against it. In addition, you could set special rules for any fight held within your fighting ring—you could make it so people couldn’t use their Inventory during battle, set it so that once someone’s HP dropped below a certain value it counted as a loss, and more. Today, however, I had my eye on one rule in particular. It was going to allow me to appraise Magey’s aptitude.

Basically, when you were using the fighting rings, there was an option you could choose called Spirit Duel. During the fight, both

combatants would be set to a specific level. The rest of the rules...didn't matter so much, so I decided I'd set them at whatever.

As soon as I locked in the settings, the fighting ring began to glow. And, just on time, Magey returned.

"U-Umm, is this outfit fine?" she asked me hesitantly. The confidence she'd shown when asking me to gauge her aptitude was all but gone now.

I sighed inwardly at her meekness, but it wasn't unexpected, all things considered. Anyone would get bashful upon being stripped of their weapons and equipment and placed in regular clothes, bereft of any and all of the stat bonuses they'd once had. She'd been transformed from an adventurer to a normal citizen.

"Yeah, that's perfect," I agreed. "Let's get started."

"O-Okay."

"Just double-checking, but you went and changed your class too, right?" I tapped my pen against my chin.

"Y-Yes! I switched my class to Novice, as you requested," Magey replied timidly.

Fun fact about the Novice class—it was the only class worse than Young Leo. You got no stat boosts at all from it upon leveling up, and there weren't even any skills for you to learn.

There was a reason, of course, that I'd asked her to temporarily change into such a class.

"All right, let's see. Name, Magey. Class, Novice..."

"U-Umm!"

I paused my writing, glancing over at Magey.

"Wh-What exactly should I do? Should I strip after—"

"No," I interrupted. "You don't need to do anything. I'm done."

"Huh?"

"Look, here's your stats and growth rates."

Ripping out the page that contained Magey's innate abilities, I handed it to her. Confused, she absently accepted it.

The trick I'd used had been a simple one, really. You see, a Spirit Duel was a kind of bout that allowed characters of wildly different levels to fight on even terms with each other. The term had actually originated from the belief that the two combatants were fighting with the strength of their souls, not their physical bodies. In reality, both combatants were set to level 25, and their stats were shifted to what they would be based solely on their innate growth rates and the bonuses provided by their class. It would be as if they'd gone from level 0 to level 25 while only using the class they were currently in.

Since Magey had been wearing equipment that didn't affect her stats at all, and was now using a class that had no stat bonuses on level up, her level 25 stats had been based solely on her innate growth

rates.

They'd turned out as follows:

【Magey】

LV: 25

HP: 200

MP: 160

Strength: 60 (D)

Vitality: 60 (D)

Intelligence: 120 (C-)

Mind: 120 (C-)

Agility: 60 (D)

Focus: 120 (C-)

Her stats had all been nice round numbers, so it proved easy for me to calculate her innate growth rates. At level 25, her stats were equal to thirty times their base growth, and after dividing her stats by thirty we got:

Strength: +2 (Bad)

Vitality: +2 (Bad)

Intelligence: +4 (Good)

Mind: +4 (Good)

Agility: +2 (Bad)

Focus: +4 (Good)

Total: 18

It wasn't that bad a spread, all things considered.

"This...shows me what my natural aptitude is?" Magey asked, staring bewildered at the page I'd handed her. She compared her growth rates to the page containing her current stats, but her confusion only seemed to grow.

Can't really blame her, I thought pityingly. It's probably a shock that she's meant to be a magician, after sticking to a melee class for so long.

That was actually the reason her current stats had looked so balanced when I Analyzed them. The growth rate bonuses given by the Fighter class had been so mismatched to her innate growth rates that she'd ended up with an even spread.

"I...I understand what you're telling me, and it's not as if I doubt you, Lord Rex, but..." Magey's voice trembled a little. "I-It's just...my starting class was Fighter! I tried out Thief and Soldier for a bit, but neither of them really fit, so I felt like Fighter had to be the class for me. To find out that I was always supposed to be a magician, of all things... It's hard for me to accept!"

Wrapping her arms around herself and squeezing tight, Magey squatted down. I slowly walked over to her, though I knew neither comforting nor encouraging words would reach her now. There was only one way to quickly get her to accept that she'd been born to be a magician.

"Why not test it for yourself?" I asked lightly.

"Huh?" Magey looked up at me, her eyes lost, like a child seeking guidance.

I grinned down at her. "Have you forgotten what else this fighting ring can do?"

"Hiiiyaaaaaah!"

I leaned forward from my seat in the spectator stands of the coliseum, watching as Magey fought in one of the fighting rings. Currently, she was duking it out with a phantom copy of a monster.

You see, the ability to fight against any monster who'd been recorded in the coliseum's database without having to worry about dying was just another one of the place's extremely handy features. You didn't get any experience or items for killing them that way, of course, but that didn't make the fight any less useful.

On a bit of a separate note, the whole phantom-monster feature hadn't been implemented in *Braves and Blades* until the game's second wave of DLC had come out. The developers had made it so that you could only fight the cooler monsters in the coliseum if you bought the DLC, something I'd missed out on since I'd, of course, not bothered to purchase that particular wave.

"Graaaaaaah!"

I focused back on the fighting ring, noting to myself that Magey was fighting an orc. She shouldn't have been having any trouble with one of the monsters on its own at her current level—they were considered to be about halfway between a beginner and intermediate enemy. However, the reality was a bit different.

First off, she was fighting a Spirit Duel, which meant that both her and the orc were at level 25. Matched off evenly like that, Magey's mediocre Strength growth rate put her in a nasty position, which was only compounded by the fact that she was using one of the practice sword and shield sets you could borrow for training sessions in the coliseum. Practice equipment might be easy to use, but it offered lower stat boosts than even basic iron equipment, which meant that Magey only had her base stats to rely on.

Suffice it to say, she was struggling a bit.

Magey swung her weapon at the orc, an angry grunt tearing from her throat. "You little—!"

I smiled a little bit, watching her. Her stats and equipment may have changed, but the long period of time she'd spent as a Fighter was

clearly coming in clutch. The skills she'd built up weren't going anywhere, and thanks to her skillful parries and dodges, she'd been able to slowly whittle down the orc's HP without ever getting hit. Until, finally...

"I did it!" Magey exclaimed, turning back to me with a wide grin on her face as the phantom orc collapsed and disappeared.

I gave her a thumbs-up, and she rubbed her nose bashfully.

Seems like she's recovered a little from the shock of learning she's supposed to be a Mage, I thought. *That's good—this is where the real fun begins.*

I signaled Magey to begin the second portion of the test. Her expression turned serious, and she dropped the sword and shield she'd been using outside of the fighting ring, picking up a staff instead. She held it up, readying herself for battle just as another phantom orc appeared at the other end of the fighting ring. This time, she instinctively backed away instead of approaching it.

"Magey!" I shouted.

The sound of my voice seemed to jolt the girl back to herself, and her feet stilled. Shaking her head, she forced herself to move forward instead of back, her staff tilting until it was pointed straight at the phantom orc.

To be clear, the practice staff Magey was using had the same bottom-tier stats as the sword and shield she'd used earlier. The staff, however, had been enchanted to allow anyone, regardless of their class or experience with magic, to cast a basic Fire spell while using it.

I had a sneaking suspicion that Magey had never once used magic in her life. Unsurprisingly, she was a lot more nervous fighting the orc than when she'd had her sword and shield in hand. Nevertheless, she steeled her resolve and shouted, "Fire!"

A massive fireball erupted from the tip of Magey's staff, swallowing the orc whole. The monster screamed in pain as the flames melted its flesh.

"Whoa..." Magey stared down at the staff in disbelief.

I grinned. I'd expected this outcome, of course—if you took Magey's innate growth rates into account, these results were only natural. At the moment, her Intelligence stat should be around twice as high as her Strength stat. And, since the equipment she'd used in both fights hadn't offered her any stat boosts, it was easy to say that the difference between her base Intelligence and base Strength stats had made all the difference.

"Graaaaaah!"



Magey jerked back to attention, staring in horror at the half-dead orc as it began stumbling its way over to her. It was honestly amazing the thing could even still stand, with how much damage it had taken.

“F-Fire!” Magey cried, waving her staff around in a panic.

The poor girl’s aim was off and her second fireball only grazed the orc, but the attack still did enough damage to finish off the monster’s remaining HP. The moment its health hit zero, it vanished, leaving a stunned Magey alone in the fighting ring.

Where it had taken her a few minutes and countless sword slashes to kill the first orc, it seemed two fire spells had been enough to obliterate the second. Magic did more burst damage than melee weapons, of course, but even taking that into account, the difference was staggering.

The people living in the world of *BB* didn’t have the knowledge to understand the minutiae behind how Spirit Duels worked, but Magey didn’t need to have a firm grasp of everything to understand that, since the Novice class didn’t offer any benefits whatsoever, it must have been her own inner strength that had caused the change in the outcomes of her two battles. Her overwhelming victory over the orc was tangible proof that her natural talents lay with magic rather than swords.

The practice staff Magey had been using slipped from her hands, falling to the floor with a clang. “I guess...I really *do* have a talent for magic...” she murmured softly.

She looked up at the sky, tears spilling from her eyes. I couldn’t tell if they were tears of joy at learning that she had a hidden aptitude, or tears of sorrow because of all the wasted weeks and months she’d spent training to be a melee-class fighter. Either way, Magey eventually took a deep breath and wiped them from her eyes, then turned to face me.

“Lord Rex, I think I’ll try becoming a Mage,” she said, looking as though a large weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

After Magey’s initial confusion had passed, she became more and more excited about her newfound talent. So excited, in fact, that she entirely forgot about trying to sound polite, except for the part she referred to me as “Lord Rex.”

“That was amazing!” she rambled on, a wide grin spreading across her face. “It’s incredible enough that you can see people’s aptitudes, Lord Rex, but to think about using a Spirit Duel for such a thing... How clever!”

To be honest, her admiration wasn’t at all warranted—most *Braves*

and Blades players knew that a Spirit Duel was a great way to trial run potential character builds. Utilizing one to test out which class worked best with a character's innate growth rate hadn't really been much of a stretch. To the people of this world, however, the coliseum was only a place to fight. Using it for anything else was probably quite the novel concept for them.

Either that, or the people of this world need to come in contact with some kind of outside stimulus before they start taking actions outside of the normal NPC routines they would have followed in BB, I mused. But, as interesting as that idea is, I'll have to wait until later to test it.

Magey and I began walking our way back to the temple, but we didn't get very far before she suddenly went, "Ah!" and turned to me with a worried look on her face.

"U-Um, Lord Rex? Would it be all right if I told my party mates that I had you look into my aptitude? O-Of course if you'd prefer I keep it a secret, I can..."

Of course it would be all right, I thought. I opened my mouth to say, "Sure, go ahead," but then I suddenly had another idea.

"Actually, why don't you just bring all of them over here, instead?" I asked Magey.

"Huh?" Her eyes went wide.

"I can look into their aptitudes while we're at it. If you'd rather not, then—"

Magey bounced on her toes, joy suffusing her face. "I-I'll bring them right away! Just give me a few minutes—I'll drag them over even if I have to tie them up and carry them myself!"

With that, she dashed off before I could say another word, presumably to wherever her party mates were staying. That's when it hit me.

"Maybe I should have thought about the consequences before I said that..."

Realizing things were about to get very busy very fast, I hurriedly told Radd and the others what their training regimen was to be for the rest of the day before Magey returned.

The next morning, as Recilia and I leisurely made our way over to the Adventurers' Guild, I swore, "I'm *actually* going to manage to watch over Radd and the other's training today."

I hadn't had the chance to do so the day before, as Magey had been true to her word and had brought all her party members back to see me a mere twenty minutes after her initial departure. Some of them had arrived wearing their pajamas, it was true, but all of them had nevertheless been extremely eager to get an appraisal from me.

Honestly, it had surprised me how little resistance any of them showed to obeying the instructions I gave them, but I could hardly turn them away after I'd let Magey haul them all the way across town to meet me. In the end, I'd had them all change their classes to Novice and undergo Spirit Duels to measure their growth rates, then given them advice on which classes would prove the most fruitful for them given their innate abilities. The task had taken up the entire rest of the day, and Radd and the others had been left to dutifully undergo their training without my supervision. Frankly, I felt a bit guilty for abandoning them like that.

"That's why I said you should have refused that girl's request," Recilia grumbled, but I shook my head.

"No, I think I made the right choice. That was a pretty valuable experience for me—I learned a lot."

Now, I've got a tried-and-true method of efficiently determining a person's growth rates, and I've discovered that my ability to see people's stats using Analyze is even more important than I first thought it was.

Before yesterday, I hadn't really been able to grasp the full breadth of the advantages having the ability to see the exact number value of people's stats gave me—I'd been too used to the game version of *BB*, where seeing something like that was easy and commonplace. In particular, I'd realized how large of a boon Analyze was when it came to switching classes.

You see, most people in the world of *BB* didn't have access to concrete information about class change requirements. At best, they assumed something to the effect of "If I work hard and level up a bunch as a Fighter, eventually I'll be able to swap into the Swordsman class." They had no clue that each class had minimum stat requirements, or that you could swap freely between any class you met the requirements for, even if it was outside of your typical class-type. Just relaying that information to Magey and the rest of her party had had a huge impact on them.

"Back when I was teaching Radd and the others," I explained to Recilia, "I realized that a lot of my game knowledge can still be used in this world. I was already thinking of actively spreading some of that information even before Magey asked me for help. Specifically, I think it would be good to explain to people that you can think of their stats and growth rates in numerical terms, and to tell them the minimum stats needed to change into various classes."

I'd actually already talked to the Guild about my idea—I didn't have all the details hashed out yet, but I thought opening up a consultation corner in the Guild hall where people could come to me to discuss their growth rates would be pretty cool.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Recilia asked doubtfully.

“I think so,” I replied. “Sure, we could gain a slight edge over other people if we kept all my knowledge to ourselves, and I realize that introducing this world to brand new concepts like this is a risky proposition...”

I trailed off, my mind filling with nasty visions of a future where those with bad growth rates were scorned over those with good ones, and a whole caste system was built to discriminate against the former. I cast the thoughts aside with a shiver, but the realization that some people might not react so well to being told their innate growth rates were low was more difficult to ignore.

Clearing my throat, I continued, “That’s precisely why I want to utilize the Guild’s help in enacting my plan. I’ll be able to solidify my relationship with them that way too, which is a plus.”

If everything worked out, I was well aware that my workload would increase significantly, and I’d probably come across a whole lot of wrinkles in my plan that needed smoothing. I was prepared for that, though—after all, spreading this information would reap huge rewards for me.

“I take it you’re doing this to gather information on adventurers?” Recilia asked.

I grinned. “Got it in one.”

You see, right now I was the only person who could use Analyze, and thus see stats as numbers. That might change later, but until someone else popped up, I’d be the sole person who could offer consultations of that sort to adventurers. If my plan worked, and my services became as popular as I thought they would, that meant adventurers from all over the world would end up coming to me for evaluations.

“Offering consultations is a great way to find adventurers who have unbelievably good growth rates,” I told Recilia excitedly, “and it increases our likelihood of running into well-known event characters before their quests are supposed to happen, at least in the canon timeline. And, most importantly, it might help me find the true protagonist.”

This was why when Magey and her party members had asked if there was anything they could possibly do to repay my kindness, I’d made a certain request of them. I’d told them of my plan to open up a consultation corner in the Adventurers’ Guild, and had asked them to spread the word about what I’d already done for them. Basically, I’d started my own grassroots advertising campaign.

I’d figured word of mouth was probably the best way to get people interested in my services, since my reputation in Freelea still wasn’t that great. Veteram was doing his best to change how people saw me by telling them all sorts of stories about my adventures, but

even with his help, I was unlikely to net any customers if I tried to draw people in myself.

I had much higher hopes for Magey and her crew. Now that they'd gone through my appraisal themselves and seen that it worked, I was sure they'd be able to convince other people to give it a try. Sure, it wasn't exactly the fastest way for me to get the word out, but it *was* the way that was most guaranteed to work.

"W-Wait a second," Recilia stammered, giving me a look of disbelief. "Did you really ask those kids to go spread the word?"

Ah well, Recilia's still young, I thought with an inward sigh. *It's possible she doesn't understand the true value of what I asked them for.*

"I mean, I could have asked them for money or something," I said dismissively, "but let's be real—there's no way a level 11 party would have been able to muster up enough cash for it to be worthwhile for me. Using them for advertising is a much better investment in my opinion."

"I... Well, I don't disagree there, it's just..."

Looks like she's still not convinced.

"Don't worry," I told Recilia firmly. "I know that my ability to see people's stats probably doesn't seem all that special to you, but the smart ones out there will recognize its value. Also, word of mouth is a surprisingly effective form of marketing. It'll take some time, sure, but if I keep up my consultation services for a while, I know I'll eventually — Hm?"

I paused—Recilia and I had just stepped inside the Adventurers' Guild, and the main hall struck me as surprisingly empty.

Did some big request come in today or something, and everyone's out trying to complete it? I wondered, cocking my head quizzically. *Ah well, I don't care enough to waste my time asking around.*

Casting my puzzlement aside, I headed toward the Guild's training grounds.

"Brother!" Recilia shouted from behind me. "Wait!"

She chased after me, then skidded to a stop when I stepped outside the Guild building. There was a massive crowd of people standing on the field in the middle of the training grounds, and every single one of them had turned to stare at me once they became aware of my presence.

My spine went rigid with tension. "U-Umm..."

Come on, just let this be a misunderstanding. Let this be something entirely irrelevant to me... Please?

Sadly, my prayers were dashed mere seconds later, when the crowd sprinted over to me.

"Rex! P-Please, check my aptitude!"

"Hey, no cutting in line! I've been waiting here for three hours!"

“Rex, I want to become an Imperial Swordsman! What do I need to do to—?”

“I’m a huge fan of yours; please shake my hand!”

“How much do you charge?! I’ll pay whatever cost, just tell me what—”

Ah, I thought. So this is what it feels like to be a celebrity who gets mobbed by fans.

Honestly, I hadn’t even realized there were this many adventurers in Freelea. The sheer amount of noise they were making was impressive—they were all talking over each other, and their voices were so garbled I couldn’t even understand half of what they were saying.

“H-Hold on a sec guys...” I stammered, raising my hand to hold them off. The crowd had hemmed me in, and I couldn’t move an inch.

“See, I told you this was a bad idea,” Recilia repeated in an exasperated voice.

Somehow, her words managed to find my ears with perfect clarity, even over the din all the other adventurers were making.

Chapter 2: Guild Master

A week had now passed since Radd and the others had conquered the Rainbow Lava Caverns, and my stat appraisal business had successfully launched. At first I'd been insanely busy, but now, at long last, things were calming down and the number of daily customers was beginning to dwindle.

As for Radd and the others, I hadn't been able to watch over them much for the past week. Fortunately, at this point in my curriculum they were primarily focusing on training independently since I needed them to learn more skills, and that process required little input from me.

You see, every person in the world of *Braves and Blades* had Personal Skills and Class Skills. Personal Skills required no training to learn, and were acquired either through leveling up or by completing specific events. The true protagonist's light-element skills and the special sword techniques of Ain, the Prince of Light, fell into this category. Typically, you could expect Personal Skills to highlight or enhance a character's unique traits—incidentally, the game version of Rex the Aloof Adventurer had had a few special Personal Skills tied to his unique swordsmanship style. I'd already checked, and I could indeed use them.

At my current level—level 50, to be clear—I had access to a Personal Skill called Sinner's Cross, which sounded totally epic. It looked super cool too, since using it resulted in the creation of a cross of dark flames that blazed like a midnight sun. Unfortunately, the skill itself was garbage. Its damage multiplier was pitiful, it took forever to activate, and since it wasn't an Art, I couldn't even use it manually. It also cost a bajillion mana, and worst of all, part of the skill animation included Rex striking an epic pose while turning his back to the enemy, which was the dumbest thing you could ever do in the middle of combat!

As if that wasn't enough, Sinner's Cross also happened to be a dark-elemental skill, which wasn't great. Dark-elemental magic was super effective against light-elemental magic, but did reduced damage to the other four elemental types—fire, water, wind, and earth. Sure, it did well against the few angel-type enemies that showed up briefly in *BB*'s endgame areas, but it was useless in the earlier portions of the game, which were filled with dark-aspected undead enemies. Not only

would Sinner's Cross not do damage against them, it would heal them!

Basically, Sinner's Cross was a flashy skill that looked really cool and was fun to use on weak mobs, but that you'd never want to use in a serious battle. The skill was yet another indignity Rex had suffered due to being a side character—while his dark, antihero aesthetic contrasted well with the game's main character, who was a symbol of light, it made him the worst character to actually play as.

Okay, come on, me—that's enough dooming on about Rex.

Trying to remain positive, I reminded myself that I'd be able to access other Personal Skills as time went on, since each character was able to steadily unlock skills based on their bloodline or race as they leveled up. Sure, sometimes characters came with a unique Personal Skill they'd been randomly given, based on the game run's seed, but that was a rare occurrence.

Class Skills, on the other hand, were skills anyone could learn after changing into the class that corresponded to them. That said, just swapping classes wasn't enough to learn a Class Skill right off the bat. For example, even if you went from the more advanced Sorcerer class to the more basic Mage class, that didn't mean you'd be able to use all of Mage's Class Skills immediately.

Basically, you had to fight numerous battles and rack up experience in a class before you were able to unlock its Class Skills. Or, that was the prevailing theory in this world, anyway. Truth was, you didn't have to fight monsters at all—you just had to use a class's basic skills over and over again to gain experience in that class. Once you built up enough of that experience, you would learn the next Class Skill in your class's skill tree.

That said, the common theory of how to unlock Class Skills wasn't entirely wrong—you *could* gain class experience through regular combat as well as practice. Still, it wasn't the most efficient way to do things. That's why I'd asked Radd and the others to spam their skills and Arts over and over and over again on the dummies in the Guild's training grounds. It was boring, repetitive work, but Radd and the others had accepted the task without complaint. I'd honestly been surprised that they hadn't whined at me once I'd told them they had to do it for days on end.

Seems taking those kids to watch the tournament in the coliseum was the right choice—it really lit a fire in them.

Glancing around the Guild hall, I realized I finally had some free time from my appraisal work. I seized the moment to go peek into the training grounds, where I quickly spotted Radd.

Radd was lucky in that most of his Class Skills were Arts, which meant that he could manually activate them whenever he wanted once he learned how, even without the appropriate level of class

experience. That said, the kind of grinding I'd tasked the others with wouldn't really do much for him. Instead, I'd told him to continue practicing his manual Arts activation.

Even just at a glance, I could tell Radd was training with more zeal than he'd had before. He'd had trouble getting a knack for the motions used to manually activate Arts when I first tried to teach him, and it seemed burning them into his muscle memory by copying them precisely over and over was where he was currently focusing his efforts. That was going to take a much longer time to do than if he just mastered the overall feel of how to activate Arts manually, but his repertoire of Arts was still steadily increasing. It helped that his stats were insane for his level. Wanting to look at them again, I used Analyze.

【Radd】

LV: 11

HP: 304

MP: 74

Strength: 132 (C-)

Vitality: 126 (C-)

Intelligence: 48 (D-)

Mind: 94 (D+)

Agility: 85 (D+)

Focus: 69 (D)

I sighed in envy. Radd's already high innate growth rates had been boosted even higher since he'd been able to switch into the Brave Leo class at such a low level, and the three pieces of stat-boost equipment I'd given him to wear added yet more bonus points to each one of his level ups. Among his party mates, he was definitely gaining the most stats per level.

At this rate, even if he doesn't do any other kind of special training, Radd'll make for a reliable endgame party member, I thought in satisfaction.

As for Nyuuk, I'd asked that he put his Mage training on hold for a bit. Instead, I had him grinding out class experience for a niche class called Item Meister. Basically, I'd made the decision since none of the spells that you could learn as Mage-Class Skills were as powerful as Flare Cannon, which Nyuuk could use thanks to his Red Flare Rod. I didn't think there was much point in having him spend his time grinding class experience to learn them. The Item Meister class, on the other hand, had a Class Skill called Maintenance, which lowered the chance of an item breaking when it was used. Since the Red Flare Rod's base break rate was already low, once Nyuuk could use

Maintenance it would never break, no matter how many times he used Flare Cannon.

This had come as a massive relief to Nyuuk, who had been pretty stressed about using the rod before, since he knew it had cost me a massive 50 million wen. Ever since I'd told him about the skill, he'd been training like hell so he could learn it and ensure that the Red Flare Rod would never break.

Ironically, the Item Meister class also had a Class Skill called Final Break that you could learn later down its skill tree, which did a huge amount of damage to all surrounding enemies in return for breaking the user's weapon. It was the perfect skill to use alongside weapons like Red Flare Rods or Goblin Slaughterers, since the damage inflicted on your surrounding enemies was based on the base damage of the weapon you broke.

I hadn't explained any of that to Nyuuk, though—he'd probably have an aneurysm just thinking about using that skill at all, let alone with such an expensive weapon. He was a worrywart at heart, and I didn't need him spiraling over the thousands of wen he'd wind up flushing down the drain if he ever did decide to make use of Final Break.

Hovering out of sight, I took a peek at Nyuuk's current stats.

【Nyuuk】

LV: 11

HP: 196

MP: 168

Strength: 39 (D-)

Vitality: 72 (D)

Intelligence: 142 (C)

Mind: 75 (D+)

Agility: 85 (D+)

Focus: 92 (D+)

Compared to Magey, he had a huge stat advantage. From off the top of my head, her spread had been:

【Magey】

LV: 11

HP: 160

MP: 93

Strength: 61 (D)

Vitality: 54 (D)

Intelligence: 67 (D)

Mind: 70 (D)

Agility: 58 (D)

Focus: 74 (D)

I grinned—it felt good to see some concrete evidence of how well my training regimen was working, even if I had no intention of bragging to anyone else over how great it was.

Next, I turned to examine Prana. She was shooting at the same practice target over and over.

I hadn't given Prana any powerful equipment besides the elemental arrows she'd begun using in the Rainbow Lava Caverns, so she'd decided to learn stronger archer Class Skills to increase her firepower. Fortunately, she had the sky-high stats necessary to back them up.

【Prana】

LV: 11

HP: 168

MP: 77

Strength: 99 (D+)

Vitality: 58 (D)

Intelligence: 51 (D)

Mind: 51 (D)

Agility: 99 (D+)

Focus: 163 (C)

Her Focus especially was insanely high, since she had the highest possible growth rate in that stat. Thanks to that, Prana could equip four pieces of equipment that boosted her stat gains upon level up, whereas her fellow party mates could only equip three.

Focus was a stat that functioned in a similar manner to how Dexterity did in other games, which meant that it had a huge impact on the power of ranged attacks. Knowing that, it was clear to me that Prana could easily step into the role of the primary physical damage dealer of Radd's party.

Leaving Prana to her practicing, I snuck over to where Mana was hard at work. Honestly, she might have been the most exceptional out of the four of them.

Back when I'd been leading Radd, Prana, Mana, and Nyuuk through their initial months of training, I'd had them all do a few prayer exercises, but Mana had reaped far more rewards from prayer than anyone else. I'd asked her about it back then, and she'd told me that it probably wasn't just due to the fact that she'd chosen Priest as her starting class, but because she'd lived in a convent in the past as well.

“It’s not as amazing a skill as it sounds,” she’d stammered weakly. “It’s just...praying is all I’ve ever been allowed to do since I was a child.”

I’d blinked at the wording—clearly, some dark things had happened in Mana’s childhood. Still, I’d chosen not to pry.

At the moment, Mana was praying again; she was the only one of her party who spent her extra time doing so instead of returning to training up her skills once her daily grinding was done. Once we’d returned from the Rainbow Lava Caverns and started into the next phase of the kids’ training, I’d noticed what she was doing and asked her why. She’d told me, “I was only able to meet you through the grace of God, so I want to show him my gratitude as often as possible.”

I wasn’t much of a religious person myself, so I hadn’t really had much to say to that. Honestly, the whole thing had made me kind of curious over how religion worked in a world where the existence of multiple gods was a proven fact.

Regardless, Analyze showed me that Mana’s constant prayers had brought her Mind up to mind-boggling level:

【Mana】

LV: 10

HP: 182

MP: 139

Strength: 41 (D-)

Vitality: 66 (D)

Intelligence: 114 (C-)

Mind: 160 (C)

Agility: 60 (D)

Focus: 92 (D+)

Prayer was ultimately a form of training, of course, so its effects would drop off the higher Mana’s stats got. Still, I didn’t care if she kept on praying from here on out for her own peace of mind.

Now that I’d checked up on everyone, I headed back into the Guild’s main hall and went straight over to the receptionist. After recent events, I was on more friendly terms with her than before.

“Ah, perfect timing, Rex,” she greeted me. “The Guild Master is waiting for you in the back room.” She opened the side door to let me in behind the counter. “I’ll take you over there.”

Damn, people’s perception of me has really changed, I thought as she smiled at me. Compared to the cold stares I got back when I started

training Radd and the others, they're so warm and respectful. I'm even getting special treatment from the receptionist!

It wasn't as if I'd changed at all as a person; they'd just gotten to know me better. There were some other people who *had* changed, however—Veteram and the rest of his party. After the news of how Radd, Prana, Nyuuk, and Mana had cleared the Rainbow Lava Caverns by themselves had made the rounds, the trio of men had shocked everyone all over again by announcing they'd be retiring from active duty. It had taken a lot of people off guard, since they were Freelea's strongest adventurers. Many members of Freelea's Guild hadn't wanted the men to go through with it, and some had even gotten angry.

Veteram hadn't had much to say to those who came to plead with him to reconsider. From what I'd heard, he'd told them all the same thing: "I have to do this to atone for my actions. There's no other way."

Honestly, their decisions weighed on me. At least in Veteram's case, his stats were pretty low compared to the game's primary cast, and his level was relatively high, so he wouldn't have gotten much stronger anyway, but...still.

If Veteram and I had never met, I'm sure he wouldn't have chosen to retire. Without even meaning to, I changed the lives of him and his party members. That's...a lot to take in.

"Is something wrong?" The receptionist asked.

I jolted, realizing I'd gotten lost in my thoughts. "Nah, it's nothing," I told her with a shake of my head.

There's no point in worrying about it, I reminded myself as I followed the receptionist deeper into the Guild. I've already decided on my course, and I can't change my mind now just because I've realized I might end up impacting people in ways I didn't anticipate. Besides, this is only the beginning—as BB's story progresses, things are only going to get worse.

The receptionist had reached the door to the Guild Master's room; she opened it and proclaimed, "Guild Master, I've brought Rex to see you," as I strode past her and into the room.

"Oh..." the Guild Master said. He looked up, and the two of us locked eyes as he raised his fist in greeting.

I returned the gesture with a grin.

"Took you long enough, Rex," the bearded man said.

"Sorry I made you wait, Veteram."

The two of us grinned at each other.

"I actually got asked if I wanted to take this position a while back," Veteram informed me as I settled into the chair across from his desk.

You see, when I mentioned Veteram retiring earlier, I only meant from his position as an A-rank adventurer; he'd been appointed Freelea's Guild Master not even a day after he'd stepped down. I'd heard tell that the previous Guild Master, an elderly man who'd once been an adventurer himself, had been hoping for a few years that Veteram would agree to succeed him in his post.

"A Guild Master serves as the face of his Guild," Veteram said seriously. "The job requires the ability to do some bureaucratic work, of course, but it's how the locals feel about you and your reputation that'll decide whether you'll sink or swim. Those things are especially important now, since we live in such uncertain times."

I nodded; he was completely correct. The Guild Master had a massive responsibility in a town—if Freelea ended up being suddenly attacked by a swarm of monsters, it would be Veteram who was expected to take charge of all the city's adventurers and instruct them on how to defend their hometown. If the person who took on the Guild Master's post was some unknown nobody, then few adventurers would be willing to give them their trust or follow them, which would very quickly end up in disaster.

"The previous Guild Master really believed in me," Veteram said with a chuckle. "Even after I'd told him I wasn't interested in replacing him, he kept introducing me to people like I was his successor. He even made me take requests that would require me to meet other influential members of the inter-city Guild organization." Veteram scratched his cheek sheepishly. "I admit that it annoyed me at the time, but now I'm glad he laid all that groundwork."

"I didn't realize you used to be so against the idea," I said in surprise.

"It wasn't that I couldn't see myself ever taking on the job," Veteram said thoughtfully. "I just had so much more I wanted to accomplish as a regular ol' adventurer at the time. I'd originally planned on adventuring for a whole other decade as long as I didn't fuck up and accidentally get one of my party mates killed or something. But then...I met you."

Veteram let out a long sigh, then looked me straight in the eyes.

"My life turned upside-down after you showed up. Everything you said defied the laws of what I thought was common sense. But now...I realize I've been giving youngsters faulty advice for years. It's something I really, deeply regret. And that's exactly why I'm pinning my hopes on you."

The new Guild Master leaned forward, an intense look coming over his face.

"I know there are people out there asking why I was even allowed to become Guild Master after making such huge mistakes. But that's

why I decided to take this job in the first place—I *will* atone for what I've done. I knew apologizing wouldn't solve anything; I needed to take some sort of action." Eyes alit with conviction, Veteram continued, "The knowledge you've brought to this Guild is revolutionary. Even if I don't do a thing, I know it'll spread to every corner of the world before long. But...I can do a lot to speed that process up. I'm confident in that—in fact, I think I'm the person best suited to help you out right now."

I nodded, feeling a bit touched. "I agree completely. And I'm grateful for the assistance."

In the end, I was just someone who'd played the game this world was based off of on a computer. My thoughts and feelings toward adventuring were totally different from the people who were going out every day and risking their lives for gold and glory, and my perception of this world differed completely from those of its native residents. There wasn't a single thing about this place that was similar to Japan. But...it was that same sense of unfamiliarity which had led to me making use of my aptitude analyzing skills, and which had caused me to be mobbed by tons of adventurers who'd heard of me from Magey. Through my work, I'd realized there was still a lot I didn't understand about how this world functioned, but I could work to fill in those gaps of my knowledge. The easiest way to do that was to ask someone who *did* know.

Back when I'd first decided to open my appraisal business, I'd talked things over with Veteram and the Guild receptionist. They'd given me their full support, and with that, things had been official. I'd had to make a lot of important decisions, and thankfully most of them had ended up streamlining stuff for me in the long run.

To give a brief rundown, we'd decided that my appraisal costs would be set based on the ranking a person had within the Guild, and a prospective client would have to make their appointment ahead of time. I would hold my appraisals only once per week, and those who had an appointment on that day had to show up having already set their class to Novice and wearing only basic equipment, in order to save me time. I'd asked the Guild to keep the appraisal costs as low as possible, and thankfully they'd been happy to accommodate.

You see, I genuinely wasn't starting my business to make money. My appraisal services were primarily beneficial for newbie adventurers who hadn't decided on what class they wanted to be—kids that green weren't going to have a lot of cash. As a result, we'd structured my appraisal pricing so that the higher an adventurer's rank was, the more they had to pay to take advantage of my services. The idea was that the money they brought in would subsidize the cost of appraising all the newbies.

As for the day of the week I'd chosen to do appraisals, I'd decided on Lightday—*Braves and Blades'* equivalent to a Sunday. The Guild took care of all the pesky stuff like taking payments, making appointments, and reserving a section of the coliseum for my use—all I had to do was show up on time, use Analyze to appraise the people there, figure out their stats, and write them down. As a result, I'd been able to work my way through a line of people much more efficiently than I ever could have before.

Honestly, I'd started to worry that I'd foisted too much work off onto the Guild, but Veteram had told me sternly, "You may not have realized it yet, Rex, but this service is a huge boon to the Guild. Everyone unilaterally agreed to help you out the moment they heard the proposal; I didn't have to convince anyone. Right now, your time is one of humanity's most valuable assets. Leave the work anyone can do to us, and just focus on what only you can do."

I'd shrugged and let it go—even though I couldn't help but think that he was overselling me quite a bit, as long as he was willing to take care of the busywork, I certainly wasn't one to refuse.

After that we'd moved on to discussing a handful of other points, the main ones being how large my cut of the profits would be and what would happen if I had to stop conducting regularly scheduled appraisals for some reason. Oh, and Veteram and I also worked out a short introductory lecture that everyone looking to sign up for my appraisal services would have to receive before their appointment. We wanted to make sure everyone understood that stats weren't everything when it came to combat, and that aptitude was just natural talent—people were free to choose whatever paths in life they wanted, regardless of what I told them. We also added in a section that made it clear that no one was obligated to show anyone else their stats, and that no one should ever feel pressured to do so against their will.

Honestly, seeing it all come together so quickly had amazed me, especially when I thought of the infinite red-tape hell that had been modern Japanese society. Sure, the modern world might be more advanced in some ways, but the lax regulations of *BB's* fantasy world sure did make some things a lot easier. It also helped that this world had ancient artifacts created by literal gods that gave people the ability to sign magically binding contracts, as well as to see through lies, and even more. I couldn't help but think that some of them gave off dystopian vibes as well as utopian ones, but as the guy making the rules, I was glad of their existence regardless.

"Now that the first week is over and I'm not seeing people every day for the opening special I was doing, I should have a lot more free time," I told Veteram optimistically.

My mind flickered back over the thousands of people I'd appraised

over the past seven days. It made me feel a little woozy.

Veteram shook his head at me in exasperation. “Rex, I keep telling you this, but you really need to be more aware of how special your abilities are. I realized it the moment I got appraised. Knowledge like that is more addictive to adventurers than alcohol or tobacco—if I was still on the job, I’d want you to check my stats every time I felt myself grow stronger.”

“Even if you could calculate with one hundred percent accuracy what they were without me having to look at them?”

“Absolutely,” Veteram swore. There was so much conviction in his voice I had no choice but to believe him.

Checking your stats doesn't feel that special to me, but I guess that's because I was able to check them anytime I wanted just by opening the menu back when I was playing the game. On the flip side though, I can definitely see it being stressful not being able to check them whenever you want to.

“Not to mention,” Veteram continued, “the only way someone can see if their training has actually increased their stats is to get an appraisal from you. The demand for that will never go away.”

“You’ve got a point there,” I said thoughtfully.

“Besides, now that you’ve written this,” Veteram said, pointing to the notebook on his desk, “people are going to constantly be lining up to see you.”

The notebook Veteram was talking about contained all of the stat requirements it took to change into any class up to tier three, as well as the bonuses each of those classes gave to a person’s growth rates. Just to be clear, I hadn’t written it all down by memory—there was no way I’d have been able to remember that many different classes and their specific bonuses. Luckily, my Analyze skill had come in clutch once again.

You see, when I Analyzed the statues in the Freelea’s temple, my skill would show me the exact stats I’d need to change into the classes they represented. That’d made it super easy for me to figure out all the class requirements. Some of the special classes had additional conditions, of course. Some of them required that you have some of our stats under a certain threshold rather than over them, and still others required the person swapping into them to have specific items or titles. All of those classes were fourth tier or higher though, and they didn’t have statues in Freelea’s temple, so I hadn’t bothered to list them.

As for the bonuses each class gave to a person’s growth rates, some of those I’d remembered, while others I’d been able to work out with a bit of math and half-remembered information. The ones I’d really struggled on I’d just figured out by changing into the class

myself and checking out my stats during a Spirit Duel. Conveniently, Rex's stats met the requirements of every class you could find a statue of in Freelea's temple, and he even knew all of those class's skills. Personally, I still thought it sucked that he didn't have even one outstanding stat, but it made him the perfect person to use as a baseline for investigating classes. Even if it *did* mean that everyone else was going to outshine him in the endgame.

Veteram picked up the notebook that was the consolidation of intense effort, then leaned forward even farther over his desk. "Until this, we only had a vague idea of what people needed to change in a different class, but now we have a list of concrete rules! Rex, if you publicize this, the world will be revolutionized! Every single adventurer in the world will want to know what their stats are just to see what classes they can be! I guarantee it!"

I guess he's right, I realized. Knowing the requirements to swap classes isn't exactly useful unless you know your own stats. I mean, what use is knowing you could become a certain class once you have 120 Strength if you don't even know how much Strength you currently have?

"Goddamn!" Veteram shouted, evidently not at all prepared to stop gushing about my notebook. "I'm so jealous of all the kids just starting out as adventurers! They'll be able to see their stats and every class's requirements, and use that information to choose what path they want to take moving forward. That's way more fun than just going along with what you start as because you have no clue what you're good at!"

"Tell me about it," I said with a chuckle.

I would wager I understood the joy of raising a character's stats in a particular way to unlock the next tier of classes for them better than anyone else. It was one of the most enjoyable parts of playing *BB*.

The people of this world really underestimate how important changing your class is, I mused. Even back when I was just playing Braves and Blades the game, I remember thinking that.

I winced at the memories. You see, every one of the characters that joined your party later on in the game, regardless of whether they were event characters or randomly recruited adventurers, were basically unusable. The AI that controlled what class NPCs chose had been garbage, so whenever you'd had a character join your party during the end of the game, their stat spread was completely fucked up. Characters who had the perfect innate growth rates to be a Warrior would have for some reason have wasted a dozen levels playing as a Mage, or some other class that was equally stupid. Even worse, it couldn't be fixed, since these characters would already be at a pretty high level.

If my plan to make the most of the three years we had before the

final battle worked, and I was able to accelerate the pace of *BB's* plot and the rate at which characters grew stronger, I'd also need the average power level of this world's adventurers to go up by a lot. That meant I'd have to find a way to stop people from leveling up in classes that didn't work for them and messing up their stat spread—in fact, I'd already come up with a plan for that too. I figured I could open a class-change consultation corner and give advice to all the stubborn adventurers who signed up thinking they knew better than me. That was for the future, though. For now, my appraisal business was enough.

“Hey, Rex...” Veteram said suddenly, his expression turning solemn. “You sure you’re okay with letting the world know about all this? If you kept this information to yourself, it would give you a huge edge over other adventurers...”

“No need to worry,” I replied with a shake of my head. “I think you’re getting me wrong—I’m not some saint like you. I wouldn’t do this if it didn’t benefit me.”

“B-But...”

I flashed Veteram a confident grin. “I’m fine with publicizing all this information because I don’t need an edge. So do your best, Veteram—go on and try to catch up to me and my disciples with the information I’ve given you. But I promise no matter how strong you become, we’ll grow even stronger than that.”

I’d been half-bluffing, but Veteram seemed convinced by my words. He raised his hands up in surrender and closed his eyes, then sank back into his special Guild Master’s chair after a moment.

“I don’t know what crazy standards you’re holding yourself to,” he muttered, “but if you ask me, you’re the embodiment of everything an adventurer should strive to be.”

I felt a pang of sadness upon hearing his words. If you’d asked me why, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you.

Interlude: Freelea's Adventurer Course

"Goddammit!" Grey Arl shouted, slamming his tankard onto the table. He glared at his surroundings, almost like he was trying to curse the entire world around him.

The C-rank adventurer was, clearly, at the end of his rope. To his frustration, he had once again failed a quest; getting promoted to B-rank was now an even more distant dream than it had been before.

In the face of this knowledge, Grey found that even his favorite bitter ale couldn't lift his spirits. Being grumpy was nothing new to him—in fact, it was how he felt the majority of the time. But today was different—his mood was particularly foul.

"How come we can't make it to B-rank, but those Rivaspire morons can?!" Grey shouted all of a sudden. "Did they bribe the Guild's top brass or something?! Cain, you think it's weird too, right?" Grey demanded, turning to his Samurai companion, Cain Sheen.

The other man, who was quietly sipping his drink across from Grey, looked at his friend with a bland expression. "Rivaspire is a strong party," he said simply, refusing to take Grey's bait.

"Yeah, right!" Grey spat, then took another swig of ale.

"Grey, I... I think you've had enough to drink..." mumbled the only woman at the table. Her name was Zemina Rings, and she was the party's healer.

"Ah, screw you!" Grey snarled. "I nearly died today because you were so late in casting your healing spells!"

Zemina's whole body went stiff. "I... I..."

"What, cat got your tongue?!"

"U-Umm..."

Damn that woman! She's always like this—acting all innocent and meek so she can pretend to be the victim. I'm the one who almost died back there!

Anger overcoming him, Grey raised his hand to slap Zemina. "It's all your fault!" he shouted. "I'm stuck at C-rank because of you!"

Béné Sett, their party leader, reached out and grabbed Grey's arm. "Stop it," he snapped.

"Let go, Béné! This bitch needs to be taught a—"

Grey's voice cut off as he flailed violently, trying to shake the other man off. Béné's grip remained firm, not loosening an inch.

Hold up, what's going on here? Why can't I break free?

There was no way Béné should be able to overpower Grey—the party leader was short and slim, where Grey was burly and imposing. Even back when they'd first met, Grey remembered himself being significantly stronger than Béné.

I've gotta be too drunk. Yeah, that's it.

Grey once again tried to rip his arm from Béné's hold, doing his best to overcome the alcohol he'd realized was addling his senses. Alas, he failed once again.

Perhaps the two of them could have stayed locked in this stalemate for a while, but Béné dropped Grey's arm, his eyes flashing. Grey heard the other man angrily shout his name, then felt something pummel into his face, leaving his cheek stinging with the impact.

Grey grunted in pain, his vision spinning. It was a moment before he was able to get his bearings once more, but when he finally did, he realized he was lying on the ground.

He...he punched me. How...how dare you, you bastard!

Overcome with rage, Grey snarled, "Béné, you fucker!" He clenched his fists and tried to climb to his feet, but ultimately collapsed back to the floor, his legs going out from underneath him.

Béné looked down at Grey with cold eyes, while Grey glared hotly upward at him. Grey opened his mouth to curse at the other man some more, but before he got anything out Béné chucked something at him. Looking down, Grey slowly took the wooden plate now resting in his lap. It had his name on it.

"Tomorrow, after you've sobered up a bit, take that to the Class Consultation Corner in the Adventurers' Guild," Béné said sternly.

"Huh?" Grey gave the other man a confused look.

"They'll give you advice on what class suits you best."

"The hell's that supposed to mean, Béné?" Grey demanded.

To be honest, he already knew. It was just that the truth of it was even more humiliating to Grey than getting knocked out by someone half his size. If Béné was saying he needed to get advice on changing classes, the obvious implication was that he no longer needed Grey to take up the position and defend the party's front line.

Is that little shit suggesting that I'm dragging the party down as I am now?!

Furious, Grey tried to rise once more, but Béné brought him to a halt once again, this time with his voice.

"Apparently, the program on changing classes lasts ten days," the party leader said calmly. "Don't bother coming back to the party until you've completed it."

With that, Béné turned his back to Grey and marched out of the bar. There was a dull thud as the door closed behind him.

Grey sat motionless on the floor, left bereft of the willpower to rise.

“Fuck!” He swore to himself, slamming his fist into the floor. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!”

After a few, long minutes, Grey finally pulled himself together enough to stagger out of the bar, but he was no less enraged now that he was moving.

You think I’m so desperate to stay in your shitty party that I’ll take part in that stupid class changing program?!

“Yeah fuckin’ right,” Grey swore.

He continued muttering angrily to himself as he stumbled away from the tiny bar, where he and his party mates had been hanging out since they’d first banded together. He didn’t allow himself to think of all the precious memories he’d made there with the others; at that moment, he wished he could forget them all.

Grey passed a number of people on the street on his way home. Every one of them shuffled as far away from him as they could get, like he was some creature they were best to avoid. It made Grey pissed all over again.

“Goddammit, why does *everyone* have it out for me?!”

Not a single one of them gets it, Grey thought, wilting inside. *They don’t understand how hard I try!*

“I... I... Ack!”

Grey stared up at the sky, numbed from the impact of the fall he’d just taken. It took his stunned mind several seconds to realize that he’d slipped on a wet patch of the cobblestone street.

Is that...someone snickering, in the distance? Grey wondered absently. He couldn’t tell; with the way his head was spinning, it could very well be his imagination.

“I get it, okay?!” Grey shouted to no one in particular. “I get it! I know better than anyone that I...”

That I’m...useless trash. Zemina, Cain, Béné...they deserve better than a party mate like me. But still, even so...

“I can’t just give up my class!” Grey moaned. “This shield is all I have! It’s all I know...”

Béné, Zemina, and Grey had first come to Freelea to chase after their dream of becoming first-rate adventurers. Béné had taken on the role of the party’s main offensive fighter, since he’d been naturally quick-footed. Zemina had already known a little bit of magic, so she’d naturally become the party’s healer, and Grey, who was tougher than the other two by far, had gladly taken on a defensive role.

At first, things had gone well. While Béné had been weaker than

Grey, he'd also excelled at finding the weak points of monsters and striking them with pinpoint precision, usually with the help of the supporting spells he could use. Zemina's healing magic had been extremely potent, and she'd known a handful of offensive spells as well, which had allowed them to safely take on monsters that were only affected by magic. And Grey, well, he'd done a pretty good job in keeping monsters from attacking his two party mates. Grey could remember a point in time where Béné had even called Grey's defensive abilities a "godsend."

Granted, fending off monsters with a shield hadn't been the most flashy job, and having to take on the brunt of all enemy attacks was quite difficult, but Grey had found purpose in it. He'd enjoyed acting as the party's Guardian, and he'd truly believed that all three of them could climb their way to the top of the adventurer ladder together.

So, when did it all start to go wrong? Grey cast his mind back in time, pondering the answer.

Things had still been fine when they'd added the taciturn, but reliable, Cain to their party. The four of them had banded together to conquer a number of beginner dungeons, and both Béné and Zemina had soon managed to change into tier two classes. Grey could remember congratulating him, and how his well wishes had come from the bottom of his heart.

Ah, it all started to change after that, Grey realized.

As their party had cleared more dungeons and their ranking with the Guild had risen, Grey had begun to feel like he'd been left behind. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to become skilled enough to swap his first tier class, Soldier, for the more powerful second class he was aiming for, Guardian.

As the gap between him and his party members had begun to widen, Grey had soon found himself a liability. Despite being the same level as his peers, and being equipped with the best defensive equipment the party had, the stark difference between his tier one class and their tier two classes had been impossible to miss. Enemies had begun to slip past him, and he'd grown too weak to safely take all the blows meant for his fellow party members.

Still, Grey had refused to admit that his failings were due to something lacking within himself. He already knew that he was innately slow and clumsy; if his defensive abilities deserted him, he'd no longer be able to stand on equal footing with his fellow party members.

Back then, Grey had found himself thinking, *If I can't even protect those three anymore, I'll have nothing left.*

Driven by an unquenchable anxiety, he had gone to the Guild's training ground and practiced until he dropped every single day. It

hadn't mattered if they'd gone dungeon diving or not; he'd refused to take a break. And after each of those training sessions, after each level he gained, he would go to Freelea's temple and attempt to switch into the Guardian class. But each time he tried, he failed. The class remained locked to him, even after he'd cleared a few mid-rank dungeons with his party and become a C-rank adventurer. Béné, meanwhile, had already managed to reach the tier three melee class of Imperial Swordsman.

Grey could no longer remember what he'd said to Béné the day he'd found out. He knew he'd begun to drink more frequently afterward, and that despite the fact that he'd continued to train daily, his heart had no longer been in it. Dungeons diving had turned torturous as he'd become ever more aware of how much he was holding his three friends back, and every time they went to one Grey had found himself drinking even more intensely upon their return. This had of course resulted in him falling even further behind his party mates, as his drunkenness had stalled his training entirely.

Even now, Grey knew he was stuck in a vicious cycle. It was just that he couldn't find a way out. He was struggling as best he could to stay afloat, but today things had come to their natural conclusion. It had finally happened; he'd lost everything.

Grey placed one hand against the wall of a nearby building and staggered to his feet.

Maybe this is for the best, he thought. If I can't even reach a second tier class, I don't deserve to fight by their sides. Maybe...maybe I should just go home and find a different job. Perhaps after a few years, I'll be able to look back on my time here and laugh at myself and how misguided I was.

Nodding to himself, Grey began to shuffle forward.

Yeah, that's right. It's not like my life's over or anything. In fact, this is just the beginning! It's just the beginning, so...

Grey sighed. It was a bit hard to convince himself of any of that nonsense when he knew his feet were leading him straight back to the Adventurers' Guild.

Minutes passed in an alcoholic blur, and eventually Grey found himself walking through the Guild's front doors. He scuffed over to the counter in the back, then placed the wooden plate Béné had tossed at him in front of the receptionist.

"U-Umm," he mumbled, voice trembling. "Is this the Class Consultation Corner?"

"It's...morning?" Grey mumbled, pressing his hand to his aching head.

His face wrinkled in pain as he opened his eyes, then took a look around. He was in the Guild's nap room.

"Oh yeah, last night, I..."

I must have passed out after making it to the Guild.

"Man, I'm pathetic."

Passing out cold in the Guild's nap room was bad enough, but Grey also remembered going to the Class Consultation Corner and spilling all his woes to the reception lady with barely any prompting. He'd told her all about how he hadn't been able to change his class to Guardian, and how he'd worried over how his party was leaving him behind. He'd even told her of how desperately he wanted to be useful to them, so he could pay them back for putting up with him for so long.

"Great, just greeeeaat," Grey moaned, cradling his head in his hands.

I can't believe I said all that! He rolled back and forth on the bed as embarrassment washed over him.

It was at that moment that the nap room door swung open, revealing the receptionist he'd spoken to the night before.

Erina, wasn't it? Grey thought, freezing at the sight of her.

Regardless, she raised her eyebrows at him as she walked into the room. "You're *still* in bed?" she demanded. "This is just the first day; at this rate, you're not going to last."

Before Grey could gather himself enough to respond, Erina chucked a bag at him. He picked it up and looked inside, finding a magician's robe, as well as a number of other items he didn't recognize.

"What's this?"

Erina let out an exasperated sigh. "Stop worrying about that and get up. You don't have the time to daydream—your class change program is about to begin."

"Huh?!"

This is humiliating, Grey thought crankily, feeling thoroughly ridiculous.

He'd protested at first, declaring there was no way he could wear such an idiotic outfit, but Erina had just sternly pointed at the contract he himself had signed. Turned out, it stipulated that he'd have to follow any and all orders given to him by his instructor until the program had run its course. Thus trapped, Grey had reluctantly put on the robe and wizard hat he'd been given, and had decided he'd go along with whatever this class change program thing was—for now.

Damn it, why'd I agree to this last night?! I mean, yeah, I was wasted

and all, but still... This sucks.

As if the outfit wasn't bad enough, his instructor had forced him to go out on the Guild's training ground and start praying. It didn't make any sense—praying was the least useful kind of training a defensive tank like him could do. Plus, as far as he knew, he had no talent for magic at all. There was no doubt in his mind; it was all a complete and total waste of time.

But still...Grey couldn't forget what Béné had told him. If he didn't finish this training, then he'd never be allowed to adventure with him and Cain and Zemina again.

But if I do finish this program, that means he'll have to let me come back, right? Right...?

"Screw it, I'm done whining and complaining!" Grey suddenly burst out.

For the record, I hate this! I'd never take this course of my own free will, but...I am the one who asked to take it, so I may as well stick with it. Besides, if I break a contract with the Guild, that'll be the end of my adventuring days.

Steeling himself, Grey bent his head, then began praying in earnest.

"Goddammit, is there really any point to all this training?" Grey grumbled to himself.

All he'd done for the last few days was pray, pray, pray, all while dressed up in that ludicrous outfit the Guild had given him. Still, as far as he knew, he had nothing to show for all that work—all he'd learned was how to pray more efficiently. As far as Grey could tell, nothing about him had changed in any fundamental way. The frustration of that was only exacerbated by the fact that he'd really committed to the training, only taking breaks to eat meals or to sleep.

Whoever came up with this training course is messed up in the head! Grey's shoulders sagged. *Man, I really shouldn't have taken this crazy training program. It's a huge waste of time.*

Sulking back to the prayer room to train once again, Grey looked around the space from the doorway, trying to find a spot for himself. His eyes narrowed on a woman's form, his brain spinning in circles as he tried to recall why it seemed so familiar.

"Wait, isn't that...?"

It's Zemina! What the hell is she doing here?!

Grey reflexively ducked back from the doorway and out of sight, hiding himself behind a pillar in the hallway. He looked down at what he was wearing, then flushed with embarrassment. The simple white robe covering his body wasn't too bad, but the thought of her catching

sight of him in the garishly colored wizard's hat currently resting atop his head was too much for him to bear.

No one would ever know I'm a tank in this getup, Grey grouched internally, slouching even farther behind the pillar. *I'd rather die than let Zemina see me like this! Goddammit, why'd I have to choose now to come back from the dining hall?!*

To make matters worse, Grey knew he couldn't hide for long—he'd have to go inside the prayer room eventually, and it was far too open a space for him to be able to conceal himself in. Zemina was sure to spot him if they were both inside.

Come on, just get out of here, Zemina! Don't make my suffering any worse!

Grey peeked around the pillar and into the prayer room, watching as Zemina looked around, almost like she was searching for someone. Then, as if one of the gods had truly answered Grey's prayers, she seemed to give up. She walked out of the room, then headed down the hallway in the opposite direction of where Grey had concealed himself.

Grey breathed a sigh of relief, but in that moment, the last of his resolve crumbled to ash.

Screw this, I'm out! I'm done with this stupid training program!

Breathing heavily, Grey stalked over to where Erina was, fully prepared to chew her out. Before he managed it though, he found himself interrupted.

"Oh, perfect timing!" Erina said. "You weren't in the mess hall, so I was just about to go looking for you. We found a party willing to take you in, Grey!"

"Huh?"

Grey was so taken aback he completely forgot to tell Erina he wanted to quit.

Moments later, Grey found himself face-to-face with the party that had agreed to "take him in" as Erina had chosen to put it. Turns out, he knew them quite well.

"Y-You guys are..."

The party leader gave Grey a friendly smile as he trailed off. "Seems like you already know us, but we'll introduce ourselves all the same," he began. "We're Rivaspire, the party you'll be working with for the next three days. It's nice to meet you, Grey."

To Grey's mortification, it seemed he'd be briefly joining the ranks of B-rank adventuring party, Rivaspire, who'd he'd always despised and thought of as his own party's rivals. They'd banded together and started adventuring around the same time as Grey and his friends, but

they'd made it to B-rank much sooner than they'd been able to manage. That fact had made hate toward them build up in Grey's heart—never, not in his wildest dreams, would he have foreseen the fact that he'd end up adventuring at their sides. Especially not in the role Erina was demanding he take.

"I can't believe I class changed to Priest," Grey grumbled under his breath.

This wasn't a new change—apparently, despite the fact that he couldn't remember doing so, Grey had changed his class to Priest the same night he'd decided to undergo the Class Change Program.

Guess that explains why they're having me pray so much, Grey thought with a sigh. After all, prayer raises an adventurer's Mind, and that's the most important stat for a healer.

Basically, what Erina had informed him on the way to meet up with Rivaspire was that the Guild wanted him to try his hand as a healer. Grey thought it was a total waste of time. After all, he had absolutely no talent for healing. He was nothing like Zemina, who seemed to have been born for the role.

Honestly, Grey had wondered why Rivaspire had even agreed to take him on, but Erina had told him their healer apparently had something going on in their personal life, and had needed to take a break from their adventuring duties for a few days. The Guild had recommended Grey temporarily take the healer's place, and the Rivaspire had apparently decided to accept the proposition.

Oh well, I've already come this far... Grey thought. I might as well see it through to the end.

Biting back his frustration, Grey managed to force himself to reach out and shake hands with Rivaspire's party leader. "Just so you know, I've never healed before," he grumbled. "So...sorry if I mess up."

Rivaspire's party leader chuckled. "Don't worry, we've been informed of your circumstances. We'll take it slow for now, and if there's anything you don't understand you can always ask us."

Thus, Grey's short stint as a member of Rivaspire—whose members turned out to be far more understanding than he'd expected—began.

When Grey first started out working with Rivaspire, he'd thought there was no way he could be a good healer. By the end of the first day, he came to the conclusion that his thought had been half-right and half-wrong.

That morning, he'd learned quickly that he had no aptitude for healing at all—the only spell he'd been able to use was Heal, the most

basic of all healing spells, and his Mind was so low that when he *did* use it, he barely even restored anyone's HP.

That had changed, however, when the Guild had loaned him several rings. Once he'd put one of them on, his Heal spell had suddenly restored almost as much HP as an intermediate to high-level spell from a career healer would have.

Gazing down at the ring on his finger, Grey found himself thinking, *You know, it's kind of off-putting how powerful equipment can be.*

Still, it wasn't like strong healing magic alone could make someone a good healer. Grey remained unable to use any spells that got rid of status effects, and he had trouble determining when he should or shouldn't heal his comrades. Sometimes he ended up not healing his party members enough, putting them in danger, and other times he healed them too often and ended up wasting all his mana.

After struggling through his first few battles, his difficulties with healing made him think back to the day he'd been cast out of his old party. While his memories were hazy, Grey knew he'd berated Zemina for being too slow to heal him.

She was probably just conserving her mana so she could keep going for the entire fight, Grey realized, regret washing over him. *I can't believe I didn't catch on to that before...*

With thoughts of his past on his mind, Grey did his best to become a good healer, but the skills required were so different from those he'd needed in order to act as a tank that he found he simply couldn't get things right. He ended up feeling so bad after that first day of adventuring that he swallowed his pride and apologized profusely to the members of Rivaspire for his subpar attempts at supporting them.

"Don't worry about it," their party leader had told him kindly. "Without a healer, we wouldn't have even been able to clear a basic dungeon like the one we went to today. We're truly grateful for your healing, no matter how slight it might be."

Following their party leaders lead, the rest of Rivaspire's members had bowed to him in thanks, which had made Grey feel both happy and infinitely more guilty for his poor performance.

Fuck! Grey thought, self-hatred welling up inside of him. *I got kicked out of my old party because I was always dragging them down, and now I'm just dragging these guys down instead!*

That night, Grey decided he would dedicate himself to healing as best as he could, at least while he was adventuring with Rivaspire. Even if he *did* totally suck at it.

Three days later, Grey's temporary assignment was over. He'd

leveled up once during that time, and Rivaspire had wholeheartedly celebrated his achievement. Still, despite that, Grey felt nothing but despair. As he walked back to the Adventurers' Guild, he bit his lip so hard he drew blood.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, *FUCK!*" Grey snarled, casting off the white robe and multicolored wizard's hat he'd borrowed. He was so angry he could barely think. "I didn't do a goddamn thing to help those guys! All I did was take advantage of their kindness!"

I was practically useless, and they had to help me so much, and even then I somehow gained a level while they didn't!

When the members of Rivaspire had invited Grey to come drinking to celebrate his growth, he'd felt so guilty he'd just given them a flimsy excuse and run away. He'd found himself thinking, *Does the Guild really want me to spend the rest of my adventuring like this?!* Then, and now, he knew he couldn't take much more.

But even if you do change back to a Soldier, you're just as useless at tanking as you are at healing, whispered an insidious little voice in the back of Grey's mind. *You'll never be able to make it as an adventurer—not unless you keep leeching off other people's accomplishments.*

Grey imagined his future if he remained as a Priest. He wouldn't have to fight directly, at the very least, and as long as he stocked up on items he'd probably be able to sell himself and his mediocre talents as a substitute healer for parties currently without one. There was a big enough demand for healers of any skill level that he should be able to find work. Still...

"F-Fuck..." Grey mumbled, pressing a hand to his eyes.

He didn't want to be the kind of adventurer he'd just envisioned. He couldn't bear it if people thought he was so desperate to make it that he was willing to keep going even when he was placing a burden on his party.

Grey's hopelessness turned to anger. *Agreeing to take this stupid training program is the worst thing I ever did. More than anything, I wish I...*

Grey uncovered his eyes, then stumbled to a stop.

"Ah, *shiiit*," he moaned.

He'd been so mad he hadn't even realized that he'd been going the wrong direction. Instead of the Adventurers' Guild, the building in front of him was the same place he'd always gone whenever he'd gained a level.

"I came to the temple, huh?"

It must have been muscle memory—Grey had repeated this walk so many times it was ingrained in his mind.

Regardless, it'd probably be good if I killed some time here and cooled my head, Grey decided.

Still cranky, he clicked his tongue and stomped up the temple's front steps, then headed inside.



The door to the bar opened with a bang. Béné, Cain, and Zemina all turned to see Grey walk through the door. Seeing their shocked faces, Grey realized he probably should have at least thought about what he would say to everyone on the way over here.

"Uhh..." Realizing how impulsive he'd been, Grey stiffened up. All of the things he'd thought about saying while he'd been training flew out of his mind. He blurted out the first thing that came to him. "...ian." he weakly muttered, before gathering himself and shouting to his old comrades, "I finally was able to become a Guardian!"

The moment he said that he regretted it. Not only had they parted on bad terms, his former party members had already reached their third tier classes. Wishing he could just vanish, Grey turned to leave.

"Congratulations, Grey!" Zemina shouted before he could take a single step.

"Z-Zemina?!"

To Grey's utter surprise, the usually meek Zemina ran over and hugged him. She wasn't the only one either.

"You finally did it, Grey!" Béné, who was normally calm and collected, had tears in his eyes as he walked over to Grey.

"Congratulations! I...I couldn't stand watching you beat yourself up over and over; that was why I suggested you— Ah shucks, this isn't the time to be talking about that! Sorry, I know this is a happy occasion, so I should be smiling, but..." Béné wiped his tears and managed to give Grey a weak grin.

Cain was as silent as always, but he smiled and gave Grey a thumbs-up.

I should have known...

In that moment, Grey realized that his friends had seen right through him all along. He thought he'd done a good job of hiding his worries, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. Furthermore, Béné and the others hadn't abandoned him, but rather the opposite. They'd been waiting for his return, hoping that the Class Change Course would give him the help they couldn't.

"I'm... I'm so sorry guys. And thank you." Tears started to spill from Grey's eyes too, and he cried along with his friends.

The grizzled bar owner shook his head with an exasperated sigh and some of the other patrons mocked Grey and the others, but they didn't mind one bit. The four of them cried their hearts out and celebrated Grey's promotion to Guardian. Of all the memories Grey had made in that bar, this proved to be the best one yet.

Some more time passed, and eventually Grey's party was able to make it up to B-rank. After changing classes, Grey's tanking abilities had improved considerably, but more than anything the party's teamwork had become miles better than it had been before. Grey was certain that was the biggest contributor to their success.

In the end, changing classes for a bit had given Grey the chance to open his eyes and see what truly mattered. Thinking back on it, he doubted he'd have ever come around if he hadn't spent some time experiencing the hardships healers faced.

After Grey had been back with his party for a while, he'd gone back to the Guild and learned from Erina that the original goal of the program had always been to get him to rank up to Guardian, and they'd never actually wanted him to stay as a healer permanently. The reason Grey hadn't been able to switch to Guardian hadn't been because he'd been lacking in the Vitality stat, but rather because his Mind had been too low. Though it was primarily a stat for healers, tanks needed it too.

It turned out Grey's natural Mind growths were abysmally low, which was what had been gating him from reaching the next tier of classes. That was why Erina had made him wear equipment that helped raise Mind, as well as change into a class that had better Mind growths so that when he leveled up he gained more of it. Grey had complained to Erina that she should have told him so if that was the case, but she'd just replied with "I explained everything to you the night you came to the Class Consultation Corner, and you signed the contract saying you understood and agreed." Had Grey not been dead drunk, or done as Béné had suggested and waited until he'd sobered up before going, there would have been no problems whatsoever. In other words, Grey only had himself to blame.

From that day onward, Grey had started talking a lot more with Béné, and the two had grown closer. He'd also started helping Béné with party management, which Grey had shown no interest in before. The two of them could often be seen at their regular bar discussing what direction their party should take in the long term and what dungeons they should tackle next.

Though Béné told Grey, "I was worried about having to do it all myself, so I'm glad to have some help," Grey still felt like he was mostly just learning from Béné and not contributing much at all. As a result, he'd started studying management so that he could help his party off the battlefield as well.

As for his relationship with Cain, it hadn't changed much, but the two spoke more frequently when they went drinking together now,

and recently Grey had learned that in Cain's homeland they introduced themselves last name first, so Cain was actually his friend's last name and Sheen his first name. Grey was so used to calling Cain "Cain" that he still hadn't been able to bring himself to start calling him Sheen, but thankfully that just made Cain laugh.

To tell the truth, the biggest change had been Grey's relationship with Zemina. There was no longer an adventurer named Zemina Rings in Grey's party—around the time they'd all risen to B-rank, Zemina had proposed to Grey. Grey had accepted, and as a result her name in the party register had changed. Zemina's last name was now Arl.

"Grey!"

Grey turned, then saw his beloved wife running over to him with a smile. The wedding ring on her finger gleamed in the sunlight.

After the wedding, Grey had later learned from Béné that Zemina had been in love with him for ages. In fact, the reason Zemina had been looking for him in the prayer room during his training that day was because she'd been worried about him.

"Good grief. You're so dense I was worried you'd never realize Zemina was in love with you," Béné had said the night before their wedding. Incidentally, they'd held the ceremony in the same bar that held so many memories for the party. They'd invited the grizzled bar owner, their other party members, some old friends, and even the members of Rivaspire to the wedding. It had been a relatively small ceremony, but an unforgettable one.

"Zemina..."

"Hm?"

"Thank you," Grey said simply, and Zemina smiled at him again.

"Don't thank me yet; our adventure's just beginning," she whispered in his ear.

"Yeah, I guess so."

That class change program turned my life around. I'm glad I worked up the courage to apply that night.

Grey had thought his life was at a dead end, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

If Béné hadn't told me to go there, or if I'd been stubborn and refused to take the course, I wouldn't be here right now. That course granted me the strength to keep going. Those guys really know how to tailor their training regimen for the person taking their course. Their analyses are all on-point too. I gained more than just strength thanks to that program. I was able to class change into Guardian and become a B-rank adventurer, but more importantly I was able to forge a deeper understanding with my party members, and marry the woman of my dreams. None of that would have been possible without the Class Consultation Corner.

Grey isn't the only one who's had his life changed for the better either. The Class Consultation Corner is open to all adventurers, and many have found the answers to their woes by going through the various programs we have on offer. If there's anything you're worried about, consider paying us a visit! Who knows, perhaps you are the next person destined to come to us in need of our services...

"So, like I was saying, that's the plot for the comic I came up with. I'm thinking we could make it an ongoing series, and distribute the volumes to adventurers every month. It'll be great advertising, and it'll also give people a concrete idea of the kind of things we do and why. Oh, and also, I think 'Class Change Program' sounds a bit too clinical and boring. How about we change it to something like 'Super Seminar' instead?"

I hauled in a deep breath, winded from my excitement, and plopped down the crude comic book I'd drawn onto Veteram's desk. He leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Yeah, suuure," he drawled. "And who's going to draw the volume's worth of comic pages that are going to be distributed every month?"

My mouth dropped open in dismay. *This guy just shot down my idea without any mercy!*

"Besides," Veteram continued with a sigh, "your services are already famous enough, Rex! Do you have any idea how many applicants we're going through as it is? The Guild's barely managing to keep track of them all. Just...stop wasting time on this pointless crap and get back to work!"

Thus, my dreams of spreading a manga throughout the world of BB were torn to shreds, destined to never even see the light of day.

Chapter 3: The Secret to Infinite Leveling

At long last, my appraisal business had calmed down; I'd finally found myself with enough free time to watch over Radd and the other members of *Braves and Blades*' training without being interrupted.

"Sorry I wasn't around much the past two weeks," I told the kids guiltily. "Things were really hectic."

Somehow, it'd taken almost half a month to appraise everyone who wanted to get their stats examined. I'd thought I had taken care of everyone in that first week after the kids had conquered the Rainbow Lava Caverns, but then the Guild had made the stat requirements for changing classes public and I'd been flooded with another wave of adventurers which had taken an entire other week to go through. On top of that, I'd also had to go over all the terms and conditions the Guild had set for adventurers to use my appraisal services, compile all the information about class requirements and stat thresholds that my students would need, and even pen some educational guides and other materials.

"Don't worry about it, old man," Radd said, waving off my apology. "The more famous you become, the better it is for us."

Prana gave him a snide grin and said, "You know...you *could* just tell him you're happy he's finally getting the recognition he deserves."

Radd's face went distinctly red. "H-Hey!"

It's been a long time since I've been able to watch them bicker like this, I thought. A smile rose to my face.

"A-Anyway," Radd stammered, hastily trying to change the subject, "what's our schedule looking like for today, old man? We're, uh, doing something special, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't have called us all out here."

I raised my eyebrows at him. *That kid is a lot more perceptive than he lets on.*

While I'd been gone, the kids' training had continued at full speed—I'd tasked them with regularly visiting a number of dungeons I'd chosen, and told Recilia to accompany them. This was to serve as their standard training routine.

Believe it or not, the kids didn't actually need my supervision anymore when it came to the more basic dungeons. They were able to fight enemies at a much higher level than their own now, thanks to

their month of preparatory training, and I'd carefully avoided sending them to any of the dungeons that featured nasty traps they'd need specialized knowledge to avoid. Still, they couldn't stick around the lower-level dungeons forever—in *BB*, once you passed level 10, it took a significantly larger amount of experience to level up. It would take Radd and the others forever to become stronger if they didn't progress to more high-level dungeons.

On top of that, *BB* was a little different from traditional RPGs, where you could just grind over and over in the same easy dungeons. Here, monsters took a much longer time to respawn after they were killed, so if you wanted to continually grind you'd have to go from dungeon to dungeon to find new batches of monsters to wade through.

At this point, however, Radd and the others had already swept through most of the nearby dungeons. Usually, a player would fix that problem by moving to a different area, but that meant we'd be wasting precious time traveling—which was exactly why I was planning on using one of the more well-known exploits of *BB* to speed up the leveling process.

"The dungeon you guys will be going to this time," I explained, "is gonna be a lot tougher than the ones you've explored so far. Which is why I'm coming with you."

"A dungeon so scary we're going to need you to clear it?" Radd murmured, his eyes lighting up. "Damn, I'm getting pumped now."

I held back a laugh, looking at the kids' faces. They looked more excited than scared.

"So I guess we're stopping by the Guild before we leave?" Radd asked. He'd done this a bunch of times now, so he knew the ropes. "Just in case there's any quests to clear out the dungeon."

"Actually, not this time," I replied with a shake of my head. "There's no point in visiting the Guild; I know this dungeon won't have any quests associated with it. After all..." I hid a smile and continued, "the Guild doesn't even know about the dungeon we're going to."

If I'm remembering right, behind this thicket, there's— Aha.

I grinned, not having expected to find what I was looking for so easily. Before me, there was a small opening that led into a pitch-dark abyss. It was an entrance to a dungeon I doubted anyone in this world knew about.

"Over here," I called to Radd and the others, motioning them to come over.

"No way..."

"Damn, there really *was* an undiscovered dungeon this close to the

city...”

I smirked, taking in the looks of awe on the kids’ faces as they stared at the cave entrance. Nyuuk turned to me with eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Unless you got right next to it, you’d never spot this opening!” he said excitedly. “I’m impressed you were able to find this place, Rex!”

Well...I don't really deserve that much praise, I thought a bit guiltily.

You see, I only knew about this dungeon because I’d visited it a thousand times already when I was playing *Braves and Blades* the game. I couldn’t tell the kids that though, since I wasn’t ready to come clean about my real identity just yet. Still, I didn’t like feeling like I was tricking them.

I shot Recilia a glance heavy with meaning, and she gave me a wan smile in return.

At least she understands how I feel, I thought, sighing, then turned back to the dark hole in front of me.

In *BB*, there were actually a good number of hidden dungeons; only the ones that were important to the story in some way were known to the people of the game’s world. That meant you had to discover the rest of them, which normally involved scrounging around until you found an entrance like this one. Finding a dungeon like that for the first time was hard, but once you’d located one, it was a piece of cake to find it again. However, you *did* have to make an important choice after you discovered one—whether or not to tell the Adventurers’ Guild what you’d found.

As if on cue, Radd chirped from beside me, “Hey, old man, are you sure it’s okay not to tell the Guild about this dungeon?”

I nodded.

While I’d chosen to keep this particular dungeon hidden for the moment, the decision had been surprisingly difficult. You see, there were pros and cons to both options. If you told the Guild what you’d found, you’d receive a reward based on how valuable the dungeon you’d discovered was, and you could take on the quests that the Guild would then subsequently start handing out for clearing the new dungeon and retrieving certain items from its depths. You’d also be able to get to the dungeon’s boss faster, since other adventurers would start coming to the dungeon as well, and they would thin out the dungeon’s monster population. On the other hand, this would mean that you’d no longer have the dungeon to yourself, which would reduce the number of chests you could loot and the number of monsters you could kill when you were looking to grind.

But, there had to be a way to take advantage of both sides of the coin, right? That question had led many an adventurer to make the same choice I did now.

“We’re not keeping it secret forever,” I assured Radd. “I’ll report the dungeon to the Guild after our first expedition through it is over.”

Sure, I could have kept the dungeon secret, but all players of *BB* knew that unexplored dungeons rarely stayed undiscovered forever. Other adventurers would eventually come across them and report them to the Guild. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t conceal one forever—which was why the consensus among the game’s players was that it was best to explore a new dungeon by yourself once, then report it to the Guild.

It feels like cheating, since I wasn’t even the one who originally discovered this place, but there’s nothing I can do about that, I thought with a shrug.

BB’s world map was massive—running around at random didn’t exactly give you the best odds of coming across a hidden dungeon. Most players ended up going through dungeons other players had discovered first in their initial playthroughs for exactly that reason. It was on the second and third runs where you could really take advantage of the hidden dungeons, since their locations were fixed, and you could get to them first as long as you’d taken note of where they were during that first playthrough. You’d even get to take advantage of the Guild bonuses for reporting them, like you were the one that had discovered them in the first place.

Radd giggled excitedly at my side. “That means we’re going to be the first people to ever see this place!”

Nyuuk’s face crinkled in worry. “Are you...sure we’ll be okay?” he asked hesitantly. “If no one else has ever gone inside, that means we don’t know what’s waiting for us in there.”

I grinned—fortunately, that wouldn’t be a problem.

“Don’t worry,” I soothed him. “I may have never reported this place to the Guild, but I’ve explored it before.”

Nyuuk breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, I see. In that case, we should be fine.”

That’s when something occurred to me—I’d only ever explored this dungeon in-game. And while *BB*’s world was similar to its game world, they weren’t exactly the same...

I need to be on guard, just in case.

“Even though I’ve been in this place before, you guys should be careful; this is a pretty tough dungeon. The monsters are all level 25, and since they’re skeleton-types, they try to ambush you at every corner. Normally, adventurers at your level wouldn’t be able to handle this place.”

“Level 25 monsters...?” Radd muttered, face turning a bit queasy.

The rest of the kids gulped, then sent worried glances at each other. Their hands clenched tight on their weapons.

You don't need to be that worried, I thought, smirking a little.

Sure, Radd and the others were a lot lower in level than the monsters we were about to face, but their stats rivaled those of adventurers with levels in the mid-20s. The kids were still going to struggle here despite those exceptional stats, it was true, but they could take it slow. There was no need to push them into clearing the whole dungeon on today's expedition.

"Don't even think about fighting the boss of this place," I told them all firmly. "Our goal this time around is just to get you guys to level up a few times. Kill as many regular monsters as you can, and as soon as you feel yourselves nearing your limits, *get out*."

Hearing that, some of the tension drained from Nyuuk's face. Radd, in contrast, was raring with energy, having discarded his fears even before I'd spoken.

"Hey, old man, does that mean if we don't hit our limits, we can kill all the monsters in here?"

"I suppose..." I muttered, narrowing my eyes at him. "Assuming you can accomplish such a feat, that is."

"Heh! Just you watch, we're gonna come back so strong you won't even recognize us!"

I held back a smile. *Sorry guys, but this dungeon is gonna be a lot more dangerous than you realize. I don't like playing games, but this one's for your own good.*

You see, I hadn't just chosen this dungeon because it was the right level for the four kids to tackle and it was still undiscovered. This place was actually the most famous place in the *Braves and Blades* for farming experience. The unique blend of traits it possessed were completely game-changing.

"All right, let's blast through this dungeon!" Radd shouted, hurtling inside without further pause.

I followed behind the party, knowing that very soon their enthusiasm would be crushed.

Let us venture forth, and dive into leveling hell!

Radd only took a few steps into the unknown before he froze, turned back to me, and said, "Hey, old man. This is an undiscovered dungeon, isn't it? Doesn't that mean it needs a name?" He grinned to himself. "Until the Guild gives it a proper name, why don't we call it Radd's Mausoleum?"

I snorted. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but this place is called the Maze of the Immortals."

Radd's Mausoleum... I thought, a tad horrified. *I can't let that kid give this place a weird name like that.*

To drive the point home I added, “Incidentally, if you use Analyze on the place, that’s what you’ll see. It’s the dungeon’s authentic name.”

Radd clicked his tongue in disgust. “I can’t believe it already has a name,” he muttered in annoyance.

I ignored him, remaining alert. I quickly scanned the area, ensuring there were no enemies nearby, then gestured for everyone to stop for a moment.

“Before you start exploring, I need to give these to you,” I said, pulling a set of cylindrical objects out of my Inventory. The items looked like flashlights, and even had buttons on them. Unlike the real thing, though, the tubes had a hole in one end.

“Are these weapons or something?” Radd asked, cocking his head to one side.

“No, these are Decoy Guns, aren’t they?” cut in the ever-knowledgeable Nyuuk. “I’ve heard you can use them to create decoy versions of yourself to bait enemies.”

I gave him an approving look—Decoy Guns were one of my favorite magical tools, so I liked the fact that Nyuuk had already heard of them before.

“That’s right,” I replied. “You can use these to make a basic clone of yourselves. They’re only usable outside of combat, and the clones disappear if they take even a little bit of damage, but losing one’s no big deal, since the Decoy Guns have infinite uses. They can be helpful in getting you an advantage against an opponent too—just create a decoy behind a group of enemies, and they’ll all head in that direction, giving you an opportunity to take a preemptive strike.”

Radd and the others nodded along to my explanation. I’d thought Radd might be too much of a musclehead to see the value in these things, but once again I underestimated his perceptiveness. He took a Decoy Gun and started fiddling around with it right away.

“This seems like a super useful item!” he said with a gleeful grin. “I just have to press this button to make the decoy right?”

“Ah, hold on a secon—”

Shit, I was too late to stop him.

I watched helplessly as Radd pressed the glowing blue button and a beam of light shot out of the tube. It hit the far wall, and not long after, a pure-white silhouette that looked like Radd emerged from the rock face. It seemed to be made of the same material as the wall itself.



“Whoa,” Radd breathed.

Prana wrinkled up her nose. “That’s *super* creepy.”

Everyone looked at the statue in mild disgust. Prana especially looked put off. I had to laugh, thinking of how mortified Radd must be, seeing everyone look at his replica with such horror.

You reap what you sow, kid.

I cleared my throat, bringing everyone’s attention back to me. “You can use these guns as many times as you want,” I began, “but they do have a few drawbacks. First of all, once you’ve used it, you have to wait thirty minutes until you can use it again.”

Radd winced, then muttered “Crap,” under his breath.

Incidentally, a Decoy Gun’s cooldown was tied to the person using it and not the item itself, so despite the multiple guns I’d brought with me, Radd was out of luck.

Prana shot Radd a withering glare. “*This* is why you should think before you act.”

Radd made a choked noise of humiliation, then said weakly, “Sorry...”

I felt a bit bad for him, to be honest, but hopefully this situation would at least serve as a good learning experience. Decoy Guns were useful items, but just like all good equipment, they came with some restrictions.

“Also,” I continued, “each Decoy Gun user can only have a single decoy active at a time. If you accidentally make one in a useless spot like Radd just did, make sure you destroy it or you won’t be able to use the Decoy Gun again.”

Radd made another choked noise, this time out of horror rather than embarrassment. I watched him run over to the decoy in a hurry with a smile on my face. It vanished after a single punch.

Well, now I know that you can grow your decoy from a wall in this world, I mused.

In *BB* the game, you’d only been allowed to shoot spaces your characters could walk on with a Decoy Gun, meaning that all decoys had to be made from floors. A little reticle had appeared on your screen to show you where your decoy would spawn, and if you’d pointed it anywhere but at a floor it had turned red to indicate that you couldn’t make the shot. I’d actually used the Decoy Gun quite often just to see whether a specific bit of terrain was traversable or not, but that wasn’t useful in this world, since physics seemed to be the only law restricting people’s movements here. No longer could an area marked as off-limits by a protruding rock formation that only came up to my waist, and I’d learned by now that even the walls and ceilings of dungeons or buildings could be scaled with a little

ingenuity.

In some respects, this world is an even better version of the original Braves and Blades, I mused.

After all, many things that only made sense in a video-game setting, like alchemy, story events, and Arts, still existed in this world in a nearly identical fashion. On top of that, you could do things here that would have been impossible in a video game but made sense in reality, like passing through “untraversable” terrain, climbing walls, and so on. In many ways, I’d say I’d been reincarnated in a mixture of the best of both worlds.

If I really did get sent to this world by some god, they really understood me, I thought with a chuckle. *Not to mention, if that god does exist, Japanese game developers should really take some lessons from them.*

I made a face, remembering how most game developers were always quick to fix bugs that benefited players in some way, but were more than happy to ignore the bugs that caused players real issues.

That’s in the past, though, I reminded myself, focusing back on the world before me. *Now that I’ve handed Radd and the others their new toys, we’re ready to tackle the Maze of the Immortals.*

I turned and gave Radd a nod and he jogged back over in front of our group, then began leading us into the dungeon’s depths.

I only let Radd enjoy his position at the head of the group for a short while before I took his place, my Decoy Gun in my hand. After all, I’d brought along a few more useful items that would be coming in handy during today’s dungeon dive. The most important of which was the Level Stopper Ring I was currently wearing. It was one of the items that’d been added to *BB* in the first DLC wave, and as its name suggested, it prevented you from leveling up while you wore it. It had no other effects whatsoever, so it wasn’t a particularly useful combat item, but it was perfect if you were trying to fine-tune the stat or growth rates of a character.

Not that a level 52 character like me is going to be able to level up from a dungeon like this one, I thought idly.

You see, my level was way higher than the monsters in the Maze of the Immortals. That meant that the experience I’d get per kill was negligible. Furthermore, if multiple people engaged in combat, the amount of experience granted would be adjusted so that the highest level participant in the fight received the greatest amount, which meant that if I helped out Radd and the others, they’d end up earning a truly pitiful amount of experience. Naturally, I planned to interfere as little as possible.

We walked into a wide, open room. Nyuuk hummed, his

expression growing thoughtful as he surveyed the area, taking in the bones scattered all over the floor. It took him a few seconds, but then understanding of what he was looking at dawned and he turned to me.

“You mentioned most of the monsters in this dungeon are skeletons, right?” he asked. “That means...”

“That’s right,” I told him approvingly. “Once you get closer, those bones will start moving all of a sudden and attack you. Better be careful.”

“Oh, so that’s why you gave us Decoy Guns!” Nyuuk exclaimed. He shot a decoy out into the middle of the room, not wasting any time in getting to the action.

The moment Nyuuk’s decoy appeared, the four piles of bones scattered across the room started to gather together and rise from the floor. Once fully formed, the skeletons all rushed at the decoy. Their movements were surprisingly agile.

The decoy crumbled at the first sword swing, which wasn’t surprising, since it had no Defense and very little health. The skeletons stared momentarily at the spot where their opponent had been, then realized they’d been duped and turned to face us.

“U-Umm...” Nyuuk mumbled, his muscles tensing with apprehension as he stared at the skeletons.

Mana, standing next to him, was tense as well, her face contorted with fear.

I didn’t blame them—they were both catching on to one of the reasons the Maze of the Immortals was so nasty. If you didn’t keep your eyes peeled in here, the enemies had been placed in a way that it was very easy to find yourself in an ambush.

“Don’t panic,” I told the quivering kids. “Wait for them to come to you and just fight like you always do.”

Despite the treacherousness of this dungeon, all of the skeletons that appeared inside of it were orthodox close-combat types. It was something to be thankful for, since once you knew that was the case, you could easily set up a formation at the entrance of each room and take them out using ranged attacks.

The skeletons charged our party in a rush, and Nyuuk quickly opened fire.

“Flare Cannon!” he shouted.

The spell, which was imbued into his Red Flare Rod, was devastatingly powerful even against enemies at this level. It also helped that undead enemies were all weak to fire.

I watched as the massive fireball Nyuuk had summoned slammed home; it slowed the skeletons’ movements considerably.

“Holy Circle!” Mana yelled, stepping in to take the next shot.

The spell Mana had used was light-aspected, and was pretty much only useful against undead enemies. It was *very* useful against them, however—it stopped the skeletons dead in their tracks, leaving them sitting ducks for Prana’s oncoming attack.

The elven girl didn’t disappoint, crying out, “Arrow Rain!” and firing off a barrage of fire arrows that I’d made for her. The resulting devastating assault took out three of the four skeletons, and the final one could barely stand by the time it stumbled into reach of Radd.

Naturally, such an injured foe was no match for the kid, especially now that he was armed with my Brave Sword. He easily parried the skeleton’s feeble sword swing and roared, “Crimson Crash!” countering it with a powerful fire-aspected Art. His blazing sword sliced through the skeleton, granting the shambling corpse a final, true death.

He wasn’t able to use Crimson Crash back in the Rainbow Lava Caverns, I thought, watching on in approval. *He’s fully mastered it just over these past few weeks.*

“Did we...do it?” Radd asked under his breath, looking at the dead skeletons in wonder.

“You guys sure did,” I said with a chuckle. “Congratulations.”

At my words, the kids finally relaxed.

“I didn’t think it would be this easy to kill monsters that are over twice our level,” Nyuuk commented.

I nodded. “The monsters in this dungeon are actually pretty weak for their level, so as long as you use attacks from elements they’re vulnerable to, you can blast right through them.”

It hadn’t been by Radd, Prana, Mana, and Nyuuk’s strength alone that they’d won this battle, however.

“Think on this for me, hm? Say you’d walked into this room without knowing an ambush was coming up and got surrounded by skeletons on all sides. What do you think would have happened?”

Radd and the others paled at that. I saw it click in their heads that the only reason they’d won so easily was because they’d had the time to prepare a bevy of long-range attacks to whittle down the skeletons’ numbers. If they’d have been ambushed on all sides, like I’d posited, Nyuuk and Mana would have had no choice but to fight in close combat, which would have made it impossible for them to cast the big spells that had proven so effective against the skeletons. Thanks to their high stats, they’d have likely still survived the encounter, but it certainly wouldn’t have been an easy victory.

“From here on out, strength isn’t going to be the most important element when it comes to beating dungeons,” I told them seriously. “You’ll need to scope out what kind of dungeon you’re in, what kind of traps there are, and how the enemies behave. Then, you’ll need to

come up with a plan to deal with all the things that dungeon's going to throw at you."

Nyuuk looked down at his Decoy Gun. "At first I thought this was a pretty boring item, but this Decoy Gun really *is* amazing, isn't it?" he said in awe. "If we can use this in the next room too..."

I grinned. It always warmed my heart to see a new Decoy Gun believer.

"I see you're catching on," I told Nyuuk, nodding in approval. "When faced with skeletons like this, you can use the Decoy Gun to lure them out, or use Analyze to figure out where they're hiding. And if you already know there's enemies in a room..." I chucked a Molotov into the room we were approaching. "You can always do this."

Seconds later, a huge conflagration filled the room before us, engulfing all of the bones that were inside it. Whether they belonged to a skeleton monster or not, they all ended up charred black. Nyuuk let out a dry laugh as he watched the few skeletons that had survived the flames stagger into the corridor, barely clinging to life.

After that, I led the kids deeper into the dungeon. The farther we went, the harder our journey became—the skeletons started disguising themselves in cleverer ways, and soon the groups that lurked in waiting for us grew to eight skeletons rather than four. That wasn't without its bonuses though—in return, the rewards for clearing each room grew substantially.

"Ah, I leveled up!"

"M-Me too!"

I grinned. At this point, everyone in Radd's party had already gained a level thanks to the number of enemies they'd defeated.

"Holy crap. It's only been an hour since we went in here..." Radd muttered in awe.

"Told you," I said lightly. "Despite being pretty weak for their level, these monsters give a lot of experience."

The skeletons in the Maze of Immortals were perfect for grinding EXP, provided you had the means to deal with their ambushes and had plenty of fire-aspected and light-aspected elemental attacks. Furthermore, while the kids weren't leveling up as fast as they had in the Rainbow Lava Caverns, Radd and the others were still reaching a new level fast enough that they didn't need to worry about running out of MP. That wasn't to say that there hadn't been a few hairy encounters at first where I'd needed to step in, but once the kids learned the ins and outs of this dungeon, they stopped needing my help.

So far everything is going smoothly, I thought, pleased.

But of course *BB* was the kind of game that put the nastiest traps right around when you'd be letting your guard down.

"Hold up, guys. There's an ambush up ahead."

"Huh?"

The kids turned around and gave me confused looks as I came to a stop at the entrance of a seemingly empty room. Still, they took up positions just behind me, dutifully following suit. As they waited for me to speak, I could see them looking around the wide room, but their expressions suggested they still couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"You sure?" Radd asked doubtfully. "I don't see anything..."

"Look up," I said, and everyone cast their gaze toward the ceiling.

"Holy shit!" Radd exclaimed.

This room's ceiling was quite high, but a number of skeletons could be clearly seen clinging to it.

"They'll swoop down on you once you're right underneath them," I said candidly.

"That's one scary trap..."

It was understandable the kids hadn't caught on at first, as all of the enemies so far had been scattered across the ground and walls. Everyone's attention had been focused downward. Not to mention that, like most dungeons, the Maze of Immortals was a dimly lit place, so you would never notice the skeletons on the ceiling unless you were looking for them. But for those who were already aware of their location...

Let's just say those skeletons were in a very compromising position.

"Calm down, you guys," I instructed the kids. "The skeletons are all concentrated in one place, which means they'll be even easier for you guys to deal with than the previous groups you've faced. Just shoot them down with ranged attacks, and then you can finish them off once they hit the ground."

"G-Got it," the kids whispered.

I chuckled softly to myself as I watched the four of them get into position. The kids were obviously still a little rattled, but they still managed to quickly snipe the skeletons from a distance. They'd really grown into full-fledged adventurers over the past month.

"Die!" Radd snarled. He stabbed his sword into the final skeleton, killing it without mercy.

I gave the kids a pleased look as I surveyed their handiwork. They'd cleared the room without suffering so much as a scratch. The only sign of exertion I could see was the cold sweat that had beaded

on Radd's forehead.

"How the hell did you know those guys were there, old man?" Radd asked, letting out a shaky breath.

"Thanks to this guy," I said, pulling out my Decoy Gun. Since I hadn't used it yet, its light was glowing blue, indicating that I could fire off a decoy. "The light's blue now, but the moment I first stepped into this room, it turned red."

The Decoy Gun and a number of escape items, like Recall Wings, couldn't be used in the middle of combat. I'd learned pretty quickly that that restriction could actually be used to a player's advantage, however. If you had your Decoy Gun out at all times, you could gauge if enemies were nearby by checking if you could use it or not. It had gotten to the point that, in my mind, the Decoy Gun wasn't an item that let you shoot out decoys once every thirty minutes—instead, it was the perfect sensor for detecting enemies.

Radd gave me a look of utter disbelief. "How on earth do you come up with these ideas?!"

I gave him a wink. "It's important to think about every way in which an item can be used."

The ability to come up with creative solutions to problems like this was what had made me so obsessed with *Braves and Blades* from the very beginning. My little trick with the Decoy Gun wasn't even half of what you could do to mess around with the game's systems either.

I chuckled evilly. "Just you wait; the real surprise is yet to come."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

I just shook my head and urged Radd and the others onward.

A few minutes passed, and soon we reached our destination.

"We're finally here," I said with a happy sigh.

The room before us was very clearly different from the ones we'd passed through until now. It was larger than the rest, but more importantly, there was a big door at the very back.

"Is that door a puzzle of some kind?" Radd asked.

It wasn't a surprising deduction; the door in question did in fact have a complex geometric pattern carved into it, and there was a lever right in front of it. It definitely looked like a puzzle door. There were four sculptures as well—two on either side of the door—and they looked like they could be rotated.

"You're right; this looks like a classic puzzle door to me," Nyuuk agreed. "I assume you have to rotate the four sculptures into the correct positions and then pull the lever to open the door. The question is: where are the hints that will steer us to the proper

solution?”

Nyuuk squinted his eyes, analyzing the objects in the room for clues. I, on the other hand, ignored him and strode forward.

“U-Uh... Old man?”

“You guys wait there,” I said, holding out a hand to stop Radd and the others from following me.

The kids obeyed, but Recilia followed after me despite my warning. I gave her a look as I came to a stop next to the lever.

“I literally just told you to wait back there.”

“I’d rather wait next to you,” Recilia said stubbornly.

I let out a sigh. Knowing that she wouldn’t budge, I gave up and grabbed the lever, bracing myself to pull.

“H-Hold up, old man! We still don’t know how the puzzle—!”

“I know,” I said, brushing Radd’s frantic complaints aside. “But I have a reason for doing this.”

I pulled the lever with all my might, and a second later an alarm blared throughout the room. Seconds later, the ground began to rumble beneath our feet.

“B-Bones are popping out of the ground!” Mana exclaimed.

She was right—skeletal hands were tearing themselves from the earth and grabbing onto the floor. Before long, they began to pull the rest of the bodies they were attached to up out of the ground.

“Skeletons!” Prana shouted. “There’s so many of them too...”

Without even checking, I knew there were eighteen of the undead monsters in total. It was more than four times as many skeletons as Radd and the others had faced in their first encounter in the dungeon.

I yawned. “You sure you guys should just be standing there? If you don’t reduce their numbers as much as possible before they get fully out of the ground, you’ll be in trouble.”

“Y-You bastard!” Radd shouted. He desperately flung himself into the fray. “Guys, use all your spells and skills with the widest area of effect! Weaken them as much as possible, and I’ll finish them off before they can get to you!”

“Fuck,” Radd panted a short time later. “I thought we were done for.”

It had been a tough battle, but the kids had managed to kill all of the skeletons in the end. Recilia and I had helped a little, but Radd and the others had killed the majority of them on their own. They’d really fought well.

“Nice job,” I said, clapping. “I honestly thought you guys would struggle more.”

Annoyed by my flippant attitude, Radd whirled on me and

shouted, “N-Next time warn us before you do something like that, old man!”

I held my hands up in surrender. “My bad, my bad. But you need to get used to reacting on the fly. Also...we’re not even close to done yet.”

I started walking back to the lever. Seeing that, Radd paled.

“H-Hang on! Don’t tell me you’re...”

“You bet!”

You see, it was the trap I was currently triggering that made the Maze of the Immortals *BB*’s ultimate grinding spot. Normally, defeated monsters didn’t respawn until a set amount of days had passed, which was why adventurers had to plan out what monsters they were going to kill and where they were going to level up next in advance. Here, however, a simple pull of a lever brought forth an infinite amount of monsters for people to kill.

It was pretty common for games to have puzzles like this one, where monsters spawned when you input the wrong solution as a sort of penalty. It was also common for this penalty to keep occurring over and over, so people didn’t try and brute-force solutions. In the world of *BB* though, that created an infinite source of experience which normally wasn’t available anywhere because of the way the game was balanced. By purposely inputting the wrong answer to this door puzzle over and over, you could spawn an infinite amount of skeletons with which to farm experience.

There hadn’t been a lot of guides on the internet for *BB*, but this one particular exploit was so good that it had been written down on the game’s wiki. Before long, every player of *Braves and Blades* had known about this trick, and it became the best leveling spot in the game almost overnight.

“All right, here comes round two,” I said lightly, then grabbed the lever.

“W-Wait up old man!” Radd yelled.

“R-Rex,” Mana stammered, hurriedly trying to stop me. “Please!”

I ignored them, humming a jolly tune as I pulled the lever again. The alarm rang out once more and...

Nothing happened.

“Huh?”

This is new.

I stood there, waiting for the next batch of skeletons to spawn, but there wasn’t even a hint of movement. The sculptures just sat there, silently mocking us.

After a long silence, Radd muttered, “Thank fucking god.”

At that moment, my spirit shattered. I doggedly tried to pull the lever a dozen more times, but despite my efforts, no new skeletons

popped up. As much as I didn't want to accept the truth, it seemed that the infinite grinding glitch didn't exist in this world.

"B-But that means now we can actually try and work out the puzzle! If we can just find any hints..." Nyuuk trailed off, scanning the walls and ceiling once more.

I didn't reply, just dejectedly rotating the sculptures so that the snake, lion, bird, and the supposed-to-be-a-sun-but-was-too-worn-down-with-time-to-tell statue were facing the door. Then, I pulled the lever again. As expected, the door opened.

"O-Oh..."

Nyuuk gave me a surprised look, but I was too busy thinking about what could have caused this to mind him.

How come the infinite monster-spawning glitch doesn't work in this world?

There was no way to be 100% sure, but I could make a few hypotheses. For starters, I could rule out the possibility that the game version of *Braves and Blades* had gotten a new patch which fixed this exploit, since as far as I could tell this world was based off of the specific copy of the game I'd owned, or at the very least off of my memories of the game. More importantly, the developers of the game had gone bankrupt right after announcing the fifth wave of DLC, so the version of *BB* I'd played should almost certainly have been the final version, with all updates and patches installed.

In which case...the most likely possibility was that whatever god had created this world had changed up how this particular trap worked. After all, you were already able to do things in this world that were impossible in the game, like climb walls or break through passages that had been coded to be impassible before. Most of those things were side effects of turning the game world into reality, so perhaps that had affected this particular exploit as well.

After all, spawning infinite monsters made sense from a game logic perspective, but in reality it would be impossible for that many skeletons to be waiting underneath the floor of this room. The actual nature of the trap likely forced monsters to lie in wait, then triggered them to wake up and ambush anyone if they input the wrong answer. But since this version of *Braves and Blades* was closer to reality, it was obvious that an infinite amount of monsters couldn't fit into a space like the one in this room. As a result, after the first summoning, no matter how many times the trap was activated, no other monsters would appear.

This wasn't to say that plenty of other things that didn't strictly make sense in reality didn't still occur in this world, but it seemed this particular exploit crossed some threshold of acceptability, and so it had been adjusted.

The problem is, I don't know where exactly that threshold lies, I thought. That's what scares me.

Still, I'd been in this world for over a month now, and this was the first time my game knowledge hadn't applied. And even before this, I'd already known I couldn't blindly trust my memories of how BB's mechanics worked.

I don't need to be too worried, I reassured myself. As long as inconsistencies like this only pop up every once in a while, I should be fine.

"Yeah, I don't gotta worry about a thing..." I muttered under my breath.

"Brother?"

All this proves is that the infinite spawning exploit in this particular room doesn't work. It's too soon to give up on my plans.

Invigorated once again, I turned back to Radd and the others and declared, "All right, we're done exploring this dungeon. There's a new place I'm taking you guys to!"

Like hell I'm giving up here! I'll find a way to get Radd and the others infinite experience, one way or another!

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Recilia asked me as she cut down a monster with a single blow.

We were currently in the Valley of Farewells, a level 7 dungeon which was normally the first area most adventurers visited after clearing their beginner dungeon. The monsters here were so weak they died in a single hit, and gave barely any experience to Radd and the others.

"Yep," I said cheerfully. "We're here to fight the hidden superboss of this dungeon."

Recilia cocked her head. "What's a superboss?"

Huh. Seems the concept of a superboss doesn't exist in this world.

"Basically, a superboss is a boss that you can't normally find, and is much stronger than anything else in a dungeon," I explained as I mowed down the enemies before me.

Honestly, it probably wasn't a good idea to clear this place out so thoroughly since beginner adventurers might want to come here to train, but if my plan worked, we'd be coming here quite frequently and I didn't want to deal with trash mobs each time. I whispered a quiet apology to all of the newbie adventurers who'd come here in the next few days, then got back to slaughtering mobs as I led the group toward a dead end.

"Is this...a gravestone?" Radd asked.

Sticking out of the ground in front of us was a small metal cross with a wreath of flowers draped over it. Radd gave me a panicked

look as I started walking in that direction.

“Wh-What are you doing, old man?!”

I grabbed both sides of the cross and started turning it. One rotation clockwise, two counterclockwise. Once I was done there was a loud click, and the ground started to rumble.

“Is that...a h-hidden staircase...?” Radd mumbled in awe.

I glanced back at him, then started walking down the stairs that had just been revealed, at the bottom of which was a wide circular room. Standing at its center was a lone knight covered from head to toe in heavy armor—the superboss I’d been looking for.

I stared into the knight’s empty eye sockets and used Analyze. Upon seeing the monster’s stats, I grinned. This superboss was an even more fearsome enemy than the doom demon I’d faced so long ago.

【Knight of Sorrow】

LV: 35

HP: 2400

MP: 0

Attack: 300

Magic Attack: 0

Defense: 300

Magic Defense: 0

Strength: 255

Vitality: 255

Intelligence: 0

Mind: 0

Agility: 0

Focus: 0

As Radd and the others filed down the stairs and spotted the knight, they all froze in place.

“H-Hey, old man, that guy’s super strong, isn’t he?” Radd demanded. “Even I can tell he’s bad news.”

I snorted. “Well, he *is* a superboss after all. His stats are a good bit higher than the Maze of the Immortals’s boss.”

Radd gulped nervously upon hearing that.

“Don’t worry,” I said, waving a hand. “He won’t attack you unless you enter his room, and he has no ranged attacks whatsoever. You’re safe as long as you stay here.”

Sure, the Knight of Sorrow was a superboss, but it was a superboss in a beginner dungeon. *BB* would have been a pretty shitty game if it just mercilessly killed new players who accidentally found this hidden passage. That’s why the developers had made it so it was slower than a turtle and could only use melee attacks—even if a player

accidentally stumbled into the boss room and triggered a battle, they'd be able to easily outrun the Knight of Sorrow and leave the room.

I explained all of that to Radd and the others, then pulled a bunch of Vitality-boosting rings out of my Inventory. I had no intention of taking even a single hit, but it never hurt to take extra precautions. You never knew what could happen, after all.

"The most important takeaway here is...you guys don't have to fight him," I declared.

Radd's face scrunched in confusion. "Huh?"

"When this guy's HP drops to half, he summons some Knights of Lament to his side. He does it again when he goes down to a quarter of his health. The plan is for you guys to level up by killing those Knights of Lament over and over."

Recilia, who'd just been watching quietly until now, suddenly spoke up. "Brother, surely you don't mean to fight that monster alone?! I won't—"

"Oh, give me a break. There's no way I'm fighting that guy. I'll just be running around."

"Huh?" Recilia gave me a confused look, and I stepped past her.

"Just watch. I promise I won't do anything dangerous, but if it looks like I'm in trouble, you're welcome to come rescue me."

With that, I strode into the room. The knight's empty eye sockets began to glow, and he raised his heavy sword.

"Looks like you're ready to go."

It had been a while since I'd fought an opponent capable of killing me. I could feel my heart starting to race as a nervous jolt ran down my spine.

I guess I should at least test this first...

I took a Molotov out of my Inventory and tossed it toward the knight. It hit his armor and burst apart, spreading flames all across his body. The knight didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed by the fire. He slowly started making his way toward me, his eye sockets glinting with a dark light.

I sighed. "Yeah, I figured that's what would happen."

It had been worth a try, but I'd assumed from the beginning it wouldn't work, since in the *BB* game, the Knight of Sorrow was immune to all forms of ranged attacks. You had to fight him in melee range, where he could hit you. An honorable duel was the only way to bring this boss down.

Well, now that I've confirmed that, it's back to the original plan.

I put some distance between myself and the knight, waiting for him to come to me. Step by slow step, he made his way over.

I had a reason for using this tactic—if you made the mistake of thinking the Knight of Sorrow was as slow to attack as he was to move

and walked into his range, you would be met with the swiftest sword swings you'd ever seen. Fortunately, I knew that, and I wasn't underestimating it. I watched the knight closely, and whenever it happened to get a little too close I'd circle around it and run away. The knight would then dutifully change course and, ever so slowly, start walking toward me again. But of course, I kept running away before it could get into melee range.

I did this hundreds upon hundreds of times, and before long, a full hour had passed.

It should be starting around now, right? I thought, beginning to make my way to the back of the boss room.

The Knight of Sorrow followed me, coming deeper and deeper in. Right as I reached the far wall, the moment I'd been waiting for came—the only time the knight ever gave the player an opening.

Now! I thought as the knight let out a bloodcurdling howl and raised its sword high.

I swiftly dashed forward, zipping past the Knight of Sorrow circled around behind it. Though his back was wide open, I didn't bother attacking him. I already knew that he couldn't be damaged while in his summoning animation. Instead, after making sure he didn't suddenly turn to attack me, I ran back to where Radd and the others were waiting.

The knight remained standing there in his summoning motion, his back turned to us. I quickly shot out a clone with my Decoy Gun onto the ceiling, then finally breathed a sigh of relief. Now I could finally explain things to everyone.

"Wh-What the heck is going on?" Radd asked.

"Just watch," I said, pointing at the knight. A magic circle appeared underneath the Knight of Sorrow, and he started summoning a Knight of Lament.

"Hell yeah!"

This was my backup plan for farming infinite experience. Maybe it was unrealistic for an infinite legion of skeletons to pop up from underground, but summoning bypassed that logical inconsistency. The Knight of Sorrow summoned Knights of Lament at half health and again at a quarter health, but those two summonings only ever happened once, even if he healed.

Thankfully, there was one other way to trigger the Knight of Sorrow's summoning attack. And that was simply to be in combat with him for a set amount of time. If all you cared about was kiting the Knight of Sorrow even a beginner player could do that indefinitely. But that would make the combat encounter last literally forever, so the developers had included a time-gated mechanic to ensure the battle didn't go on forever. It summoned one knight every hour, and

unlike the HP threshold summons, there was no limit to how many times he could do this. Just by running around for a few hours you could create a few powerful enemies to grind on.

“Just to make sure I’ll run around for another hour and see what happens. If he summons another knight, then we’ll know for sure this strategy will work...” Grinning from ear to ear, I turned back to Radd and the others.

“I mean, we already gained a few levels today, and we’ve been out for a while,” Radd said, looking unenthusiastic.

“Mm-hm. We learned a lot from fighting enemies way stronger than us too,” Nyuuk added.

“I’m gonna go home and take a bath,” Prana said.

The three of them started heading back up the stairs.

“Wait uh...”

I turned to Mana, who was the only one who hadn’t said anything. She gave a little start and started glancing between me and her party mates.

“U-Umm, I-I’m really sorry about this but I promise to reflect on my actions!”

Mana bowed apologetically to me and then started running after Radd and the others. As I watched them go, Recilia walked over to me. I knew I could always count on my dependable little sister.

“Thank god you’re still with me. Recilia, help me think of a way to convince everyone to—”

Recilia smiled and said, “Come, let’s return home, brother.” She grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and started dragging me up the stairs.

“W-Wait! I need to see if we can spawn enemies infinitely down here or—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You have a mountain of tasks awaiting you back in Freelea. If you waste time down here the Guild leader’s going to be cross with you again.”

I tried to shake Recilia off, but unfortunately all of my enchanted rings gave Vitality bonuses instead of Strength ones. With my pitiful base stats, I couldn’t dislodge myself from Recilia’s grip no matter how hard I tried. Recilia effortlessly dragged me up the stairs and quickly caught up to Radd and the others.

“You know old man... You’re smart, but sometimes you act really dumb.”

“Hmph, don’t be rude, Radd. That’s part of what makes him so cute,” Prana said with a mischievous grin, and Radd gave me a pitying look.

I had been this close to bringing my plan to spawn infinite monsters to fruition, but now it seemed like it would be quite some

time before I could confirm if it had worked or not.

“It’s finally time.”

A week had passed since that sad day in the Valley of Farewells. I’d finally mastered an efficient way to spawn infinite monsters, and thus had gathered Radd and the others. This would be a long and protracted battle, so I’d procured plenty of HP, MP, and regeneration potions for the party, as well as an ample stock of Holy Fire, which momentarily stunned undead enemies. I’d also prepared a new, special set of equipment for the four of them.

“H-Hey old man isn’t this...”

I hadn’t told any of them our destination when I’d set off, but now that we were right in front of the dungeon it was obvious where I’d be taking everyone.

“That’s right, the Valley of Farewells.”

I nodded and strode firmly into the dungeon. I was of course headed straight for the hidden room with the Knight of Sorrow. I turned the cross-shaped graveyard in the correct pattern and skipped down the stairs.

“Hold on! Didn’t we talk about how inefficient it was to wait an hour before each monster spawned last— Huh?”

Radd’s protests died on his lips as he reached the bottom of the staircase and saw what awaited them in the room ahead.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

There was no longer just a lone knight standing in the center of the room. Instead, the space was packed to the brim with more than a hundred and fifty Knights of Lament. It looked like a scene straight from hell.

“Wh-What in the world did you do?” Radd asked, and I pointed at the ceiling above the knights.

“Is that...you, Rex?” Prana muttered.

Indeed, protruding from the ceiling was a white statue of me made from the same material as its surroundings.

“D-Did you...”

Nyuuk immediately figured out what I’d done, and I hefted the Decoy Gun in response.

“That’s right. It’s the decoy I threw up last week.”

It was an ingeniously simple plan. The Knight of Sorrow summoned a single Knight of Lament each hour, and the only requirement for the knight to enter a combat state was for there to be a valid target within the room. Clones were, of course, valid targets. In-game, this wouldn’t have worked. You could only put clones where you could walk, and all of those places could easily be reached by the

knight. But in this world you could use the Decoy Gun on basically any surface.

“The Knights of Lament don’t have any ranged attacks either, just like their master. Which means...”

“They can’t reach the decoy on the ceiling?” Radd muttered in amazement.

I nodded, then turned back to the room, where all of the knights were helplessly swinging their swords upwards.

“Though in truth I wasn’t sure whether or not the ceiling would count as ‘inside the room’ for the knight.”

Fortunately, it had. The decoys lasted forever until hit by an attack, so even after we’d gone back to Freelea the knight continued swinging up at the target it couldn’t reach and summoning new servants every hour. I put my hands together and quietly thanked the Knight of Sorrow, who couldn’t even be seen through the throng of Knights of Lament.

“H-Hold on! If you could have done that from the start then why hadn’t you just fired a decoy without entering the room in the first place, brother?” Recilia asked.

“You can only fire the Decoy Gun when no enemies are aware of your presence. The knight’s staring at you from outside the room when you come down the stairs, so the only time he won’t notice you is when he enters summoning mode and his senses are dulled,” I explained.

“O-Oh. Sorry, I didn’t realize you’d thought so far ahead...” Recilia hung her head, admitting her defeat.

Had the Decoy Gun not worked I really *would* have tried to run around for hours to get him to summon a few knights, but of course I wasn’t going to tell her that.

“Anyway, this is where the fun begins.”

Upon hearing that, Radd and the others tore their gaze away from the room and looked at me.

“Don’t forget, the ultimate goal of all of this was to get you guys a bunch of levels. Just summoning the knights isn’t enough, they’ve gotta be defeated too.”

“Y-You’re not serious, are you?” Radd stammered, and I gave him a wicked grin.

“If my calculations are correct, there are exactly one hundred and sixty knights in there. You’re going to kill all of them before the end of the day!”

The ensuing battle was probably the harshest Radd and the others had ever fought. Normally it would have been impossible for the four

of them to take on one hundred and sixty enemies way above their level at once, but because all of the knights were solely focused on the decoy, they'd been able to pull the knights away one at a time and fight them one by one. Of course, the Knights of Lament were still level 30, so even with all four of them whaling on one, it still took a while to kill each one. They were also forced into an unnatural formation to ensure they could all attack from melee range in a cramped space.

Things got even dicier whenever the Knight of Sorrow summoned another Knight of Lament, since there was no telling where in the room it would spawn, and if it would go straight for the party or the decoy. It was a hellish, grueling gauntlet, but Radd and the others managed to kill every last Knight of Lament. By the time the final Knight of Lament had fallen, Radd and the others had all grown to level 28.

But that fight was only the beginning...

"Here I go! Gravity!" Nyuuk shouted the next day, firing off the first shot of the battle. He launched a powerful gravity spell at the swarm of Knights of Lament.

Since the knights were immune to long-ranged damage, the spell didn't do anything to harm them. However, its secondary effects still applied. Gravity was a spell that only those who reached the fourth tier of the magician classes, Archmage, could learn. It slowed down the movement speed of anyone in its area of effect, and put a heavy debuff on all targets, preventing them from using any movement-based skills. The knights that were hit all changed targets from the decoy to Nyuuk, but they were now even slower than usual.

"All right, let's do this!" Radd shouted, charging toward the swarm. He had a shield as well as his usual Brave Sword, and he thrust the shield out in front of him.

"Shelltron!" Mana shouted, casting a spell on Radd that buffed his defenses. Radd was enveloped in an aura of white light right as one of the knights swung its massive claymore at it.

"Too easy!" Unperturbed, Radd blocked the swing with his shield, successfully executing a guard.

Guard, much like parry, was a special action you could take by pouring mana into the weapon equipped on your off-hand. In-game, you executed a guard by holding the action button down, whereas a parry required just tapping it momentarily. Parries were more difficult to time but gave you a huge edge in battle whereas guards were less effective but easier to execute. However, even with a basic guard, if you timed it well the enemy became momentarily stunned.

As the knight staggered backwards, Prana rushed forward. “Hah!” she shouted, thrusting a spear at the staggered knight.

Since ranged attacks didn’t work on the knights, Prana had temporarily swapped out her bow for a spear. Most weapons did damage based on the user’s strength, but there were a few special weapons that scaled off of other stats. Spears and bows in particular scaled more off of Focus than Strength, as did other weapons that took more finesse to wield than might. Prana’s thrust was aimed perfectly, and the point of her spear drove through the tiny gap in the skeleton’s armor. Her skills as a Sniper came in handy when it came to landing precision attacks.

The armored knight let out a silent scream, and Radd took advantage of the opening Prana had created.

“Crimson Crash!” Radd brought his blade down on the knight’s breastplate while Prana thrust at another gap in its armor.

In a last-ditch attempt to do even a little damage, the knight raised its sword to bring it down on the two children. “Haaah!”

However, there was one other melee fighter in this group.

“Stinger!”

Recilia deftly circled behind the knight and launched a devastating attack at its unguarded back. The knight looked down at the blade protruding from its chest, dazed, then crumpled to the ground and vanished. She stared coldly down at the remains of the disintegrating knight, then vanished like a gust of wind.

She’s taking out these mobs like they’re nothing...

Radd and the others had cleared out all of the Knights of Lament that had spawned after a week, but since I’d left the Knight of Sorrow and my decoy alone, he had been able to spawn a bunch more replacement knights. Radd and the others had unsurprisingly been exhausted after killing over a hundred and sixty knights, but after a good night’s rest they’d fully recovered. I figured this grinding spot would be good to get them all the way to 30, so we were doing a bonus leveling session.

At the start of the fight yesterday Radd and the others had struggled pretty hard with each knight, but as their levels grew and they got used to the knights’ attack patterns, the Knights of Lament went from being threatening foes to easy marks. Now they could kill one in half a minute or less.

“I-I did it! I finally leveled up!” Mana shouted, the last of the group to reach level 30. Radd and the others excitedly ran over to congratulate her.

“We did it, old man! We’re all seasoned adventurers now!” Radd shouted, turning back to me.

As I looked at the four of them I was overcome by emotion—

though, once I began to use Analyze, it wasn't all positive emotion.

【Radd】

LV: 30

HP: 684

MP: 150

Strength: 284 (B)

Vitality: 297 (B)

Intelligence: 105 (C-)

Mind: 227 (B-)

Agility: 218 (C+)

Focus: 183 (C+)

Holy shit, he's so strong!

You see, Radd and the others had grown so fast it was kind of staggering. The scariest thing was that they were all still just level 30. Four levels under Veteram, and twenty levels under me. But in comparison, my stats were total garbage.

【Rex】

LV: 52

HP: 542

MP: 281

Strength: 209 (C+)

Vitality: 204 (C+)

Intelligence: 214 (C+)

Mind: 204 (C+)

Agility: 210 (C+)

Focus: 212 (C+)

Radd had already surpassed me in almost every stat.

Forget seasoned; you guys are the best of the best at this point!

As you could see from my level, I'd gotten a bit stronger since reincarnating here. My battle with the Demon Lord had gotten me two whole levels, since I'd forgotten to wear the ring that kept me from leveling up. However, the paltry stats I'd gained from those two levels were nothing compared to Radd's explosive growth. Radd's Intelligence and Focus were lower than mine, but he had slightly better Agility and Mind, while his Strength and Vitality were almost 100 points higher than mine. And those were the two stats a close-ranged fighter really needed.

The math didn't quite work out like this because of a bunch of other factors, but he was effectively one and a half times stronger than me. If we fought now, Radd would wipe the floor with me. The

saddest thing was that Radd was a tank-attacker hybrid so he didn't even have the highest damage stats of the party.

Speaking of the rest of the party, I used Analyze to take a look at their stats.

【Nyuuk】

LV: 30

HP: 456

MP: 393

Strength: 96 (D+)

Vitality: 183 (C+)

Intelligence: 348 (B+)

Mind: 186 (C+)

Agility: 199 (C+)

Focus: 225 (B-)

【Prana】

LV: 30

HP: 390

MP: 169

Strength: 248 (B-)

Vitality: 150 (C)

Intelligence: 124 (C-)

Mind: 124 (C-)

Agility: 248 (B-)

Focus: 388 (B+)

【Mana】

LV: 30

HP: 408

MP: 347

Strength: 96 (D+)

Vitality: 159 (C)

Intelligence: 302 (B)

Mind: 406 (A-)

Agility: 153 (C)

Focus: 223 (C+)

The backline had all been focusing on their main offensive stat, so they had even more firepower than Radd. Nyuuk and Prana both had more than 300 points in their main stats, while Mana's Mind was a whopping 406.

Man, this just isn't fair!

Mana had actually been going to the Guild's prayer room so

frequently that the other adventurers had started calling her the “Little Prayer Saint.” There actually was a system in *BB* where you gained titles based on your fighting style, so I had a feeling the people of the world just liked handing out chuuni titles to people. After all, even I had one—Rex the Aloof Adventurer.

Incidentally, I was supposed to be one of the strongest characters in the early game, but it hadn’t even been two months since the goddess’s message and that already wasn’t true. In a regular run in-game no protagonist would be stronger than Rex after two months of in-game time.

Although, I guess I’m the reason these guys managed to get this strong...

I’d been so focused on finding an infinite grinding spot for these guys that I hadn’t stopped to consider the ramifications.

“Old man?”

Radd gave me a searching look, and I hurriedly tried to act normal.

It’s fine, everything’s fine.

The reason Radd and the others were so strong was because they were wearing stat growth-raising equipment, and had changed to higher tier classes at a much lower level than people usually could. However, there was one flaw to speed-leveling them this way. Because they had to continue wearing those specific equipment sets, the strength of their equipment was much lower than their own abilities.

On the other hand, I didn’t have to give a shit about my gimped growths, so I could wear as strong equipment as I desired. Thinking back on it, maybe I would still be able to win a fight against Radd. Besides, I still had a chance to redo my character from the ground up if I took that trial. There was no need to panic.

“G-Good work you guys.” Putting a lid over my stormy emotions, I smiled down at Radd.

Relieved, Radd smiled back. “R-Right? But, well... We were only able to get this strong because of you, old man. So uh...thanks.”

“Y-You’re welcome.” It was rare to see Radd being nice to me.

“That’s right! Thank you so much, Rex! If it wasn’t for you we would never have gotten this strong!” Mana said, her eyes glimmering with admiration.

Seeing these kids thank me so earnestly drove away any negative feelings I’d had about being passed up in terms of strength.

I really need to calm down. I already knew that training Radd and the others up would temporarily—hopefully only temporarily—make them stronger than me.

Sure, their superfast growth had taken me a bit by surprise, but even if I’d known their stats would get this high I still would have

done what I did. If anything, I could finally get to work on all the other plans I'd made now that they were strong. The whole reason I'd trained Radd and the others up was because there were important dungeons I couldn't clear without them, and items I couldn't obtain without their help. You could say at this point my preparations were finally over.

"Now that you guys are this strong, it's finally time."

It was probably a good idea to conquer one dungeon before the looming tournament to test just how strong Radd and the others had gotten.

"We're going to put your guys' newfound strength to the test. Tomorrow we'll be going to conquer a new dungeon, and this time I'll be fighting with you guys."

Radd and the others looked ecstatic at the opportunity to go at a new dungeon for real. They really were adventurers through and through.

"It won't be just any dungeon either. This time, we're going to try and conquer a super hard dungeon, one of the ones every adventurer dreams of clearing."

"You mean..." Radd trailed off, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

I nodded and replied, "That's right, tomorrow we're going into one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness!"

It's time to start beating this game for real!

Chapter 4: The Twelve Ruins of Darkness

“It’s time to head into our first Ruin of Darkness. Despite what I said yesterday though, our goal this time around isn’t to clear the whole thing. What we’re after are some rare items.”

I’d trained Radd and the others up using the fastest methods I knew how. First I’d had them raise their stats via training while their levels were still low. That had let them change to tier three classes while they were still level 4, after which they’d leveled all the way up to 10 in their first dungeon. Afterward they’d steadily leveled up, and I’d managed to get all of them to their tier four classes—which were generally considered the strongest by the people of this world—before they even hit level 15. Then I’d found an infinite grinding spot to power level them to 30.

“Unfortunately, there aren’t any shortcuts left for you guys to take.”

At the very least there were no higher level infinite grind spots, and the only classes better than the tier four classes were unique classes that required fulfilling specific conditions to unlock. Of course the strong foundation they’d already built up would give them a huge advantage when it came to adventuring, but eventually they would start leveling up slower and slower. Meanwhile *BB* got drastically harder as you progressed into the late game, and the difficulty spikes kept coming faster and faster. I’d used every trick in the book to get them this strong, but of course the developers of the game had expected their players to break it to some extent, and they’d planned the difficulty accordingly. Furthermore, this world wasn’t like the game in one important way. There were no do-overs. If I messed up this run, I wouldn’t be able to start over. I couldn’t afford to let my guard down just yet.

“The Twelve Ruins of Darkness are super difficult dungeons, but they also contain highly valuable rewards. Right now, you guys have the stats to wear B-rank equipment, and if you boost them via enchantments you can probably even wear A-rank equipment. That’s what we’re going out to find, though ideally we can get some unique equipment drops as well...”

“H-Hold on a sec, old man! What do you mean by A and B-rank equipment?” Radd interjected.

“Oh yeah, I guess I never explained the equipment rank system to you guys.”

Whoops, my bad, I thought. I knew so much about the game that I had a bad habit of using game terms and assuming everyone knew them.

“Basically, every single stat has a letter ranking associated with it. 1-4 is E-, 5-14 is E, 15-29 is E+, over 30 you’re at D- and so on. Right now, your guys’ stats are ranked as such.”

I took out my notebook, went to the page that had Radd and the others’ stats on it, and showed it to them again, pointing out the numbers next to Radd’s current stats.

Strength: 284 (B)

Vitality: 297 (B)

Intelligence: 105 (C-)

Mind: 227 (B-)

Agility: 218 (C+)

Focus: 183 (C+)

Total Rank: 57

“Make sense?”

Nyuuk nodded in understanding, while Radd and the others continued perusing their stats.

“I see. This makes it a lot easier to see what your strong and weak points are compared to just raw numbers. That’s why the letter rankings exist, right?”

I nodded. “You got it. If you want rough estimates of someone’s abilities, the letters are far more useful.”

I liked hard data so I preferred the numbers myself, but I could see why others wanted the letters.

“Most equipment’s stat requirements line up with the letter thresholds. For example, the Brave Sword you have now needs a Strength of D+ to wield. In terms of hard numbers, that’s 75.”

“So that’s how equipment works...” Radd stared intently at his Brave Sword, absorbing this new revelation.

“How much you can gain from training and the amount of experience you need to reach the next level is determined by the letter ranking of your stats too, not the absolute value. Obviously you want your letter ranking to be higher so you can use better equipment, but you don’t want to let it get too high, at least not for every stat.”

“Oh, I remember you explaining this before! If you keep the stats you don’t need lower you’ll get stronger faster, right?!”

“Ultimately, yeah.”

Incidentally the higher your letter ranking got, the harder it was

to get it even higher. From E- to E you only needed to raise a stat 5 points, but at the higher levels, it took 100 or more to get to the next tier. As a result, even if two people's total stats added up to the same value, the person who had less balanced growths would end up with an overall lower letter ranking. In comparison, my rank was higher than I would have liked considering my paltry stats.

Strength: 209 (C+)
Vitality: 204 (C+)
Intelligence: 214 (C+)
Mind: 204 (C+)
Agility: 210 (C+)
Focus: 212 (C+)
Total Rank: 54

Despite being much weaker than Radd, my total letter ranking was only three below his. And it was the exact same as Prana's, since she had the most lopsided stat spread.

Strength: 248 (B-)
Vitality: 150 (C)
Intelligence: 124 (C-)
Mind: 124 (C-)
Agility: 248 (B-)
Focus: 388 (B+)
Total Rank: 54

She had almost double my Focus but the same total ranking. That also meant that the exp penalty she ate for having high stats was the same as mine. I was once again reminded of how pathetic Rex was, but there was no point in dwelling on it.

"I told you guys before how you want to maximize the stats that matter the most for your class while making sure the ones that matter the least stay low—Strength for mages, Intelligence for fighters, and Agility and Focus for non-scout classes. Well, a lot of rare equipment tends to give huge boosts to a few stats while lowering others, and those are the equipment pieces we're looking to get."

As I wrapped up my explanation I noticed Radd looked a bit hesitant.

"I get what we're after, but the Twelve Ruins of Darkness are like the final frontier for adventurers. Do you really think we'll stand a chance in there?" he asked.

It was rare to see Radd lose his nerve; he was usually the reckless one. I let out a long, exaggerated sigh.

“You really don’t get it, do you? Take another look at your stats. A good, long look.”

“Huh? U-Uh, okay.”

It was surprisingly easy to get Radd to do what I said whenever he was confused. As Radd looked down at the page containing his stats I said, “Here compare that to me. Your stats—the ones that matter anyway—are already higher than mine.”

“Oh...”

It seemed Radd hadn’t truly registered that until now, and I smiled at him.

“Have more faith in yourself. There aren’t many adventurers out there with higher stats than an A-ranked veteran like me. You’re no longer a fledgling adventurer taking on your first dungeon; you’re one of Freelea’s best.”

“I-I...”

He was at a loss for words. It was probably hard for him to truly believe he was cream of the crop since he’d only started adventuring two months ago. Granted it was less crazy of a transformation than a regular Japanese dude suddenly becoming an A-rank adventurer overnight. Radd fell silent for a few minutes, trying to absorb the reality of who he’d become. Finally, he looked up at me, his expression resolute.

“Let’s blast through this dungeon, old man! I want to see how far we can go with the strength you gave us!”

“Ha ha, that’s the spirit! I’ll be fighting alongside you guys this time too, so there’s nothing to fear. But don’t forget, you’ll only get experience if you actually participate in combat. If you keep spacing out like that I’ll take all the kills before you can blink.”

“Heh! I won’t lose to a geezer like you!”

It looked like Radd had regained his usual confidence. *Yeah, that cheekiness suits you best.*

“All right then, let’s go.”

“Aye, aye!”

We strode into the dungeon, everyone in high spirits. This would mark my first foray into one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness. The one I’d chosen for the honor was the Undead Gatekeeper’s Hollow, a deadly dungeon where many rare items and a powerful boss waited.

Thirty seconds after stepping into the dungeon, we ran into our first foe.

“Something’s coming,” Prana—who had the best hearing out of all of us—said.

“It’s finally time...” Radd muttered, nervously hefting his sword.

Seeing that, I flicked him on the forehead.

“O-Ow?!”

“I told you not to worry. Don’t be so tense. Everything will be fine.”

“Y-You keep saying that, but...”

Oh man, you really don’t get it, do you. I promise you, there really is absolutely nothing for you to worry about. After all...

“Like I said, I’ll be taking all the kills before you can even blink.”

“Huh?”

The moment the first monster entered our line of sight, I drew my Metallic King Sword.

“Gale Slash!” The Art activation buffed my speed considerably, and I rocketed toward the enemies at lightning speed.

“H-Holy shit! He’s so fast!”

I sensed Radd chasing after me, but there was no way he’d get here in time. The Agility stat’s impact on your speed plateaued at around 200. Past that you needed Arts to speed you up even further, but Radd hadn’t learned any rush Arts yet.

Let’s see, two packs of zombies, seven in each pack. I’ll start with the left pack.

All thoughts of Radd and the others vanished, and I focused solely on the enemies before me. Adrenaline pumped into my bloodstream as I mentally mapped out the combo of Arts I needed to use.

“Arts Plus!”

I kept moving as I resheathed my blade, preparing an iaido Art, then shouted “Quickdraw!”

I was using a Western-style sword rather than a katana, but since I was activating the Art manually the distinction didn’t matter.

I’ll start with you!

My Quickdraw was powered up with the usage of Arts Plus, as well as comboing it out of my Gale Slash, and I was able to slice the zombie’s head clean off in one stroke.

The Twelve Ruins of Darkness were the main dungeons of BB. They were designed for the protagonist and their party, and barring certain unique circumstances, were unclearable by NPCs. With how difficult they were in their default state even top-class adventurers like Veteram didn’t stand a chance. And, of course, with each one the protagonist cleared the rest got even harder.

Ha ha ha ha ha ha! This is a slaughter!

However my stats were even higher than Veteram’s, and I was decked out with top-tier equipment. Plus, I knew how to use manual Arts, so the enemies here were a cakewalk for me. Besides, the

monsters in the Twelve Ruins of Darkness were all set at a default level of 25. Radd and the others would have no trouble with these enemies either, and in fact they would barely get any experience from them. Which was why there was no need for me to hold back. I didn't have to worry about efficient experience distribution and could just go ham.

Who's next?!

I dashed past the corpse of the zombie I'd just slain and activated my next Art.

"Slashback!"

I unleashed a reverse swing against three zombies at once, but with my crappy strength my blade stopped halfway through the third zombie's neck.

Tch, I'm going to need more power. One Art just isn't enough. I once again activated Arts Plus and used a combo to add in a second attack.

"Flashcut!"

I finished the final zombie off with a second Art, marking my fourth kill. I grinned, reveling in how easily the zombies fell before me. While there was no reason I shouldn't be participating in today's battles, technically there was no reason I had to either. I was doing this solely to blow off pent-up stress.

Fighting difficult battles where I barely made it through by the skin of my teeth had been fun when *BB* was just a video game, but there was nothing fun about them when I was literally risking my life each time. However, brutalizing helpless mobs of monsters was extremely satisfying. I knew it was petty, but that was just the kind of personality I had.

I swung my blade in a complex pattern, activating two more Arts at once.

"Divine Thrust! Stinger!"

The zombies had finally recovered from their initial shock and were reacting to my attacks, but there was nothing they could do against this killer combo. My series of thrusts pierced the hearts of two more zombies, killing them instantly.

All right, just one more to go and this group's done!

But just as I pointed my sword at the final zombie, I heard a familiar voice.

"Arts Plus." It was calm and collected, like always. "Quickdraw. Flashcut."

Two blades sliced through the final zombie, cutting off its head and torso. It crumpled to the ground in three pieces, then disintegrated into particles of light.

"That's eight," Recilia said coolly, and I turned to see that the other group of zombies had already been annihilated.

A shiver ran down my spine. *I guess when it comes to speed I just can't beat her.*

I turned back to Recilia, who was now looking at me.

"It looks like we're done here, brother." She sheathed her two short swords and gave me a triumphant grin.

【Recilia】

LV: 30

HP: 638

MP: 187

Strength: 382 (B+)

Vitality: 274 (B-)

Intelligence: 142 (C)

Mind: 254 (B-)

Agility: 525 (A+)

Focus: 209 (C+)

Total Rank: 64

From there on out, the moment we could see an enemy, we would both rush forward. We were spotting them at around the same time, but Recilia was always the first to start moving. That had less to do with her Agility being higher and more to do with her faster reaction time. It wasn't her stats that were giving her an edge, but her honed skills as a warrior.

However, despite Recilia's early starts, we would always hit our first enemy at around the first time. That was because my weapon had slightly more reach than hers. My Metallic King Sword was about twice the length of her short swords.

This is my chance to overtake her kill count! I thought once again, unleashing a flurry of Arts at the next group of monsters.

"That's three!" I shouted.

"Four down," Recilia replied smugly.

In the end, I was always just a hair too slow.

Damn, so this is the power of someone who's got stats to 500! I glanced over at Recilia just as she turned to me and our eyes met. She gave me a small grin and said, "This fighting style really does suit me better. Thank you for convincing me to change it."

"Y-Yeah, you made the right choice."

"Yes, I'm certain now I won't let a mere gargoyle get the best of me. Next time I'll be able to protect you, brother."

You see, I'd recommended Recilia change her main weapon from longswords to short swords—specifically Ninjato. That weapon type suited her stats better. While she'd already been a peerless

swordswoman with a regular longsword, her best stat wasn't Strength, but Agility.

Sword fighters didn't need more than 200 Agility to function effectively. But Recilia had a Godlike amount of Agility, so it would have been a waste not to utilize it. After some discussion, she'd made the decision to swap from Imperial Swordsman to the Ninja class, which used skills and Arts that scaled off of Agility.

Most weapons scaled primarily off of Strength, but *BB* had a staggering variety of weapon types, and most of them scaled off of some combination of stats. Bows for example got only 30% of their damage from Strength; the remaining 70% came from Focus. Even swords, the most popular weapon type, only scaled 80% off of Strength, with the remaining 20% came from a combination of Focus and Agility.

Also, the amount of Strength-scaling a weapon had tended to go up in proportion to its weight. Axes and greatswords, for example, scaled solely with Strength, whereas daggers scaled 40% off of Agility, 40% off of Focus, and only 20% off of Strength. Ninjato, which were a sub-type of short swords, scaled 80% off of Agility and 20% off of Strength. Normally, Agility was a stat that was useless to raise past 200, but if you were using a weapon that scaled off of it suddenly it had value past that.

I glanced over at Recilia again.

"Is something the matter, brother?"

"No, just thinking."

Right now, Recilia was wearing a ninja outfit rather than the armor made of springs she'd been using during leveling. Naturally that was armor that raised her Agility more than her Vitality or Strength. Despite Agility being generally not too useful past 200, there were an awful lot of equipment pieces that gave big Agility boosts. When Recilia had committed to the class change I'd found her a full set of Agility-raising equipment since she no longer needed high Strength. Right now, she was much, much stronger than she had been as an Imperial Swordsman, despite her level still being 30.

Incidentally, the Ninja was the unique class that was easiest to meet the requirements for. Unique classes were special classes that didn't follow the standard four-tiered grouping of regular classes that anyone could become so long as they met the stat requirements. Each one required fulfilling at least one extra condition on top of just having the stats necessary to become that class. Most of the time those conditions were quite difficult to clear, but Ninja's was surprisingly easy. To become a Ninja all you needed to do was reach the fourth tier of swordsman classes, Swordmaster, and the fourth tier of the rogue classes, Master Thief, and learn all of the skills associated with both

classes.

Swordsmen classes had high Strength and Agility stat growths while rogue classes had high Agility and Focus growths. Generally, if you were leveling as one class tree you tended to unlock the requirements for the other class tree just by default. Furthermore, there was a Ninja class change statue hidden in every temple so you just needed to be able to find it. Of course, these conditions were hidden from the player, so on a first playthrough, you were unlikely to unlock Ninja naturally, but that was where my extensive game knowledge came in handy. Because it was relatively easy to class change to Ninja, it only gave a total of +18 bonus stats to a character's growth rates, which was on the low end for unique classes. However, the skills you could learn while leveling the class were broken when it came to close combat. The most important of them was Ambidextrous. The skills effects sounded plain on paper—if you had the same weapon equipped in both hands they were both treated as being equipped to your dominant hand. However, this was an indispensable skill if you wanted to make a dual-wielding build.

To break down why, we can start with talking about close combat fighters. Ones who fought with one-handed weapons could be broken down into roughly three groups. The first group fought with a weapon in one hand and a shield in the other, and they were balanced between offense and defense. These fighters generally served as the party's tank, and this was the group that Radd was part of. The last two groups specialized in offense. The first two-handed their one-handed weapon to increase its power, while the second dual wielded one-handed weapons in both hands.

Now, in *BB*, two-handing a weapon lowered the stat requirements to wield it proficiently, and also gave a 30% boost to its attack. Dual-wielding carried the restriction of needing to use the same weapon in both hands, but it effectively doubled your attack. Normally you'd think there's no point in two-handing when it's only a 1.3x multiplier since dual wielding was a solid 2x, but *BB* wasn't that simple a game. In the simplest case, where you had 100 Attack and your opponent had 0 Defense, two handing your weapon would mean your attacks would do 100×1.3 damage—or, more simply—130 damage. Dual wielding would mean your attacks do 100 twice, aka 200 damage.

In that situation, dual wielding would be clearly superior. But if the enemy had 100 Defense, then the dual wielder would do 0 damage with each attack while the two-hander would at least be getting some damage in. There were also Arts to consider when making the choice. If you pressed the Art button while swinging with your off-hand, what would come out was not an Art but a parry or block attempt. Since Arts could only be activated with weapons in the dominant hand, the

sub weapon you used while dual wielding didn't actually provide that much more damage.

As a result, when building out an offensive character it was generally easier to go two-hander than dual wield. However, under the right conditions, you could make dual wielding far, far stronger than two-handing. The reason for that was quite simple. If you were two-handing a weapon you only needed a single Dynamic Motion Z controller to fight, but if you were dual wielding you needed two. Those things were ridiculously expensive—7980 yen a pop—and the developers of *BB* had been quite money-hungry. In other words, dual wielding was way stronger than two-handing, but you needed two Dynamic Motion Zs to make that happen. On top of that, you also needed the Ninja's Ambidextrous skill.

While “treating both equipped weapons as if they were equipped on your dominant hand” sounded like a plain effect, what that ultimately meant was that you could use Arts with both weapons. Furthermore, with manual activation using your two very expensive Dynamic Motion Zs, you could even activate different Arts with each weapon at the same time. Incidentally, there was another class, Sword Saint, which was one of the strongest melee classes. That class had a skill known as Twin Arts and if you were able to learn that, your dual wielding got even more powerful. In comparison, there wasn't much that drastically multiplied the power of two-handing. Even if there was, it was hard to beat the power of being able to use Arts with both weapons at once. And right now, Recilia was proving just how devastating having access to twice the amount of Arts in the same amount of time could be.

“Tri-Edge! Flashcut!”

“Grrr! Tri-Edge!”

I was trying my hardest to keep up with Recilia, but since she was throwing out twice as many Arts as me I simply couldn't match her firepower.

Holy fuck, her build is so broken!

Furthermore, while Recilia hadn't yet unlocked the Sword Saint class to get Twin Arts, Master Thief was the class that learned Arts Plus, so she did have access to that. The only advantage I'd had over everyone else thus far was my ability to stack Arts together with Arts Plus, but now Recilia could do that too. Not only that, she could do it with two weapons at once for a whopping 4x multiplier. I could not hope to beat her in a pure damage race.

I had actually class changed to Ninja myself too, but I had opted not to dual wield. Or rather, I simply couldn't dual wield. I had only one copy of my main weapon, the Metallic King Sword. You had to equip the exact same weapon in both hands to dual wield, but I didn't

want to downgrade to a weaker weapon I had multiple copies of. My stats were shitty enough that if I was using a worse weapon my total damage would go down even with dual wielding. On the other hand, Recilia's stats were so high that she was able to deal massive damage even with two mass-produced basic Ninjato.

I wish I was that overpowered! I shot Recilia a jealous glare, but she didn't even notice.

A few seconds later she glanced back at me and said, "It's nice finally being able to fight together with you, brother," with an innocent smile on her face.

"Y-Yeah, it is," I replied, forcing a stiff smile to my face.

I silently clenched my fist as I watched Recilia push her way farther into the room, humming contentedly. Rex was supposed to be the strongest in the early game at least. I couldn't let myself be beaten just yet, both to protect Rex's reputation, and my pride as Recilia's older brother. With renewed determination, I started hunting for a new mob of monsters to slaughter.

"More enemies coming!" Prana shouted, and Recilia immediately jumped into action.

If I tried to beat her in a close combat contest I'd just lose again. This time, I was going to try a different tactic. Ranged attacks!

I swapped my sword back to a one-handed grip and started throwing Goblin Slaughterers with my off-hand. They'd been indispensable during my duel with the Demon Lord, but normally these knives were pretty hard to use. They did triple damage to goblin-type enemies and only one third of the regular damage to enemies of other types, and were also impossible to take off once equipped. Aside from very specific enemies like Bring, they weren't much use. However, there were actually loopholes you could use to get around some of their drawbacks.

First off, if you used it as a throwing weapon instead of a melee weapon, the properties of most throwing skills would override the damage debuff to enemies that weren't goblins, and were also a way to get rid of the weapon without actually unequipping it. Throwing it also retained its goblin debuffing properties since it still counted as doing damage with the weapon so even against goblins throwing them was better than using them as melee weapons.

"Quickdraw!"

As soon as I threw my first dagger I swapped back to two-handing my sword and activated an Art. The Goblin Slaughterer that I threw managed to kill one zombie and gravely injure a second. I didn't get an opportunity to throw any more daggers but the early advantage I'd

built allowed me to eke out a win.

“That’s four!”

“I was only able to kill three. Well done, brother.”

For the first time since entering this dungeon, I’d managed to bag more zombies than Recilia.

This is one advantage two-handing has over dual wielding!

Because of how dual-wielding worked, it wasn’t very conducive to using off-hand items or swapping around equipment a bunch. In contrast, two-handing provided the freedom of temporarily switching to a one-handed stance to equip something else in your off-hand. However, while I’d managed to win one bout, I knew Recilia was too stubborn to give up just because of that. I could only reliably get one kill with the early dagger throw. That gave me an edge against smaller mobs but if we ran into bigger groups of a dozen or more Recilia would be able to rack up more kills still.

We continued progressing swiftly through the dungeon and when we were only a few rooms away from our goal, the moment I’d been waiting for finally came.

“Tri-Edge. Flash— Hm?” Recilia frowned and stopped in her tracks.

Now’s my chance!

Dual-wielding’s biggest weakness was how much mana it drained. Recilia’s fighting style was already mana-intensive, and on top of that she’d been throwing out twice as many Arts as me. Arts Plus also doubled the mana cost of the Arts you used during it, and since Recilia had mastered manual activation she’d been using Arts that were much stronger than someone at her level would normally have access to. It was hardly surprising that she’d run out of MP. Especially since every Art’s cooldown was a global timer, meaning Recilia had to use different Arts with each weapon each time. That meant she couldn’t just use mana-efficient ones and had to constantly cycle through some more expensive Arts as well. All of our engagements had been brief with some time in between each so Recilia had managed to hold on for a while, but her Intelligence stat was way lower than mine, and she’d been burning through MP way faster so eventually her reckless mana usage had caught up to her.

“Curses!”

That being said, Recilia was plenty strong even without Arts. Adaptable as always, she quickly stopped trying to use Arts and swapped to purely regular attacks. Of course, she’d killed so many more than me already that it would be impossible for me to overtake her total kill count at my current pace. Fortunately, I had a plan in mind! I equipped another Goblin Slaughterer in my left hand and raised it high.

“Final Break!” I shouted, and the knife began to glow.

I was right in the middle of a pack of enemies, and they were all quickly enveloped by the expanding light. Final Break destroyed your equipped weapon in return for doing a huge amount of damage to all nearby enemies. That damage was based off of the sacrificed weapon’s base stats as well, and Goblin Slaughterers had very high base stats. A massive ball of light that hurt only enemies eradicated all of the zombies in the vicinity.

“Phew,” I said, watching as the Goblin Slaughterer in my hand crumbled to dust. Grinning, I turned to Recilia. “That’s fourteen for me. I believe that makes us exactly even.”

“I admit I let my guard down, but you won’t be able to outwit me next time.”

Recilia smiled back at me and took a mana potion out of her Inventory. She quaffed it down in seconds and wiped her lips. With how far in we’d gotten I suspected the next mob pack would be the last. Whoever killed the most in the final engagement would be the winner.

The two of us were unstoppable. We dashed through room after room, searching for the final set of enemies. Finally, we found our prey.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

We spotted the pack at the exact same time. There were seven zombies in this mob, ensuring that there couldn’t be a tie. We both leapt forward at the exact same time, raising our weapons high.

“Turn Undead!” Mana suddenly shouted from behind us, putting an end to our contest.

“Huh?” I watched, stunned, as all seven zombies were destroyed by a wave of purifying light.

“Oh...”

As the name implied, Turn Undead was a spell that instantly killed undead-type monsters. It didn’t work on particularly powerful undead enemies or bosses, and you got no experience for killing enemies this way, but in return it was a guaranteed kill on regular mobs. These zombies did indeed count as regular mobs, but this was the most anticlimactic ending to our contest that I could have possibly imagined. I turned back to Mana, annoyed.

“Why did—”

“Will you two cut it out?!” Mana shouted, interrupting me. It was rare to see her this angry. “Those knives and that mana potion are extremely valuable items! Why did you waste them like that?!”

“Err, well...” I didn’t really have a good response for that. I glanced over at Recilia, only to see that she was shamefully averting her gaze.

“I can’t believe you two! Not only are you wasting precious items you kept on leaving us behind after clearing each room. You can flirt all you want later, but stop treating this dungeon like it’s a date!”

“W-We were taking this seriously, I promise...” I muttered, but my words didn’t even sound convincing to me.

She’s gonna give us a good long lecture, isn’t she?

I shot Recilia another glance, and Mana shouted, “See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about! Now listen here, Rex!”

I hurriedly turned back to Mana and made sure to give her my full attention. And so, my pointless contest with Recilia came to a close with neither of us winning. In the end, it turned out that Mana was actually the strongest member of our party.





“So that’s this dungeon’s boss...” Radd muttered, looking over at the lich sorcerer in the distance. No one was fooling around now.

I admit Recilia and I hadn’t been taking the dungeon seriously at first, but we both knew we couldn’t afford to underestimate this boss. Every one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness’ bosses were a major threat, and since I only had the one run with no saves I could load, I needed to approach this battle carefully. This dungeon’s boss was the Elder Lich, and he possessed an instant kill spell that could quite literally kill anyone from full health.

“Hmm...” I let out a long breath and tried to relax.

BB was a game with permadeath. NPCs died all the time in events, and if any of your party members died during battle you could never get them back. Fortunately, the game wasn’t too cruel, and barring extremely hard fights or very deadly events, it was rare for your characters to die. Of course, I’d died on my very first day in this world, but that normally didn’t happen unless you were fighting something way above your level. Normally when a character’s HP reached zero, they just fainted. If that character happened to be the protagonist, then you got a game over. They had to lose a good chunk of HP even after fainting to actually die, and if you had any means of healing them you could easily bring them back to consciousness.

However, all liches possessed an instant kill spell. That spell didn’t do damage but instead inflicted a status called death on characters, which killing them instantly. If you didn’t prepare ahead of time, you were likely to get one shot. There was equipment that gave you instant death resistance, but it was hard to acquire in the early game and it only gave you a resistance to the status, not perfect immunity to it. You could use the Barrier Ring to protect against instant death as well, but an Elder Lich’s instant death spell did damage as well as inflicting the death status so the Barrier Ring didn’t work on this particular boss. On top of that the Elder Lich was generally quite strong, even if you didn’t take into account its instant kill powers. There was a chance we’d lose to him even if we did have perfect death immunity. But as always, I had a plan.

“We’re up against an undead-type boss. As long as we strike at its weak point with the right attacks, we’ll be able to win.”

This was in fact why we needed to kill him first, before we did any of the other Twelve Ruins of Darkness. Just like how the enemies in the ruins grew stronger with each one you cleared, the bosses did as well. As you cleared out the ruins the remaining bosses would learn more deadly skills, lose some of their weaknesses, and have more

dangerous mobs in the boss room with them.

The Elder Lich was so strong that we couldn't afford to fight him head-on as we were now. But he would only get stronger from here on out, so we had to kill him as we were now. Of course, my plan wasn't perfect, and it came with its own set of risks.

"Everyone remembers the plan, right? If my first attack fails..."

"We're supposed to abandon you and run. We know, we know."

It was obvious from Radd's tone that he had zero intention of actually abandoning me. I understood why he didn't like leaving a comrade to die, but it was imperative he follow my instructions.

"Listen up, because this is important. I'll be able to escape on my own. But if you guys aren't gone immediately, I won't be able to run because the boss will turn his attention to you guys."

"...Fine," Radd said, finally giving in. He wasn't the only one who didn't like this plan, though.

"Brother, I really do think I should take the vanguard rather than you," Recilia said, giving me a worried look.

I firmly shook my head. "Sorry, but no. You don't have enough Magic Defense for this plan."

The Ninja class had a broken skill that increased your Defense the higher your Agility was, which was why they could afford to wear such light armor and still resist physical attacks. However, that buff only applied to physical Defense and not magical. Furthermore, magical attacks were much harder to dodge, so Recilia's health would be shredded by the Elder Lich.

"But even so, I—"

"Besides, I've fought liches before. I understand their attack patterns better than you, which is why I'm best suited for this task."

"I understand, but..." Recilia trailed off, unable to think of a suitable counterargument.

"Don't worry." I gave Recilia a reassuring smile. "It's true that the Elder Lich is a powerful foe I can't possibly hope to defeat alone. Even you wouldn't be able to do it, and you have the highest attack power out of all of us. However, I'm not alone, now am I?"

I cast my gaze over the five reliable comrades who'd stuck with me despite my eccentricities.

"I have you, Recilia. And Radd, and Nyuuk and Prana and Mana. If even one of you guys weren't here, I wouldn't even try to take this boss down. And even with all six of us we're going to need to be in perfect sync to win this fight. If we can manage that, though..." I grinned fearlessly. "That rotting pile of bones doesn't stand a fucking chance."

I was probably the only person in the world that would make such a boastful claim, but I knew for a fact that it was true. Everyone

looked up at me, dumbfounded.

“He he he.” Prana was the one who finally broke the silence with a laugh. “Now that’s the Rex I know. I trust you, so I’ll trust in your plan,” she said with a smile.

“Heh I guess you’ve never let us down before, old man. I just wish you’d come up with less crazy plans,” Radd said, finally cracking a smile. Thankfully, that was enough to get my stubborn little sister to finally cave in as well.

“Very well. I’ll follow your instructions, but in return promise me that you’ll stay safe. If you get so much as a scratch...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be just fine,” I said confidently, stepping forward.

Everyone had put their faith in me—there was no way I was letting them down. I could tell Radd and the others weren’t afraid anymore either. My speech had convinced them that we could do this. Unfortunately, I hadn’t done as good a job convincing myself. Shit, my knees are shaking! No one else had noticed my trembling at least.

Sure, I might have reincarnated in Rex’s body, but on the inside I was still just a regular Japanese guy, not a legendary adventurer. Unlike Radd and the others, I hadn’t chosen the adventurer life, it had been thrust upon me. Only a crazy person wouldn’t be scared when going up against someone who could kill them in a single spell. Thinking back on it now, I’d probably let myself get so wrapped up in my contest with Recilia because I’d wanted to forget that this boss battle was waiting for me at the end of the dungeon.

There was one other thing about the Elder Lich that I’d neglected to tell Radd and the others. I’d mentioned to Recilia that I understood his attack patterns the best, but in truth that hardly mattered for the first few seconds of the fight. After all, the Elder Lich was coded to always start the battle with Soul Reap, its instant-kill spell.

If I can’t do something about that first spell, I’m dead.

Soul Reap had a base 30% kill chance. That seemed small at first but when you considered a bad roll meant game over that 30% looked a lot scarier. I certainly didn’t want to stake my life on those odds.

Goddamnit, this was *not* the life I envisioned having when I first reincarnated! After the fight with the doom demon I’d decided I would sit back and let the real heroes go out and save the world for me. Yet here I was on the front lines serving as bait for our party.

But I mean, what choice did I have? We absolutely needed the rare item this boss dropped, and I couldn’t let anyone else handle a role as dangerous as this one. Besides—

“I believe in you, Rex! You can do this!” Mana shouted, cheering me on.

I gave her a thumbs-up in return and got to the very edge of the

Elder Lich's aggro range. I swapped my sword to a one-handed grip and raised it high.

"Godspeed Flourish!"

I started off the battle with one of the fastest Arts in my arsenal. Not even Recilia had been able to master the complex motion this Art required. That being said, it wasn't a particularly useful one because of how long its startup was. In return though, it sped up your movement more than any other Art in the game. I shot forward, accelerating faster than I ever had in my life. By the time the Elder Lich noticed someone was approaching and turned his glowing red staff toward me, I'd already made it halfway to him.

Gale Slash!

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't terrified of the deadly mana gathering in that staff. But this is my one chance to look cool in front of everyone, I can't wimp out now! With a wordless cry, I swung my sword in a wide arc. As planned, it missed the Elder Lich completely, and the undead monster sneered as he started his incantation.

"Soul Re—"

But I was able to throw out my real attack before he had a chance to finish.

"Take this!" From the start, I hadn't been trying to hit him with any of my Arts. I flung my left hand forward, scattering glowing motes of dust everywhere. Those motes were an item known as Sacred Ash, which had powerful anti-undead properties. I'd originally prepared it to deal with the infinite spawning enemies in the Maze of the Immortals in case Radd and the others had trouble with the skeletons there, but since those ended up not spawning infinitely, I'd been able to hang on to it until now.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaah!"

As the holy ash rained down on the Elder Lich he let out a tortured scream and canceled his incantation. However, Sacred Ash's effects only lasted for a few seconds. Furthermore, you needed to imbue Sacred Ash with mana before it had any effect so you couldn't keep throwing it out constantly. The Elder Lich glared at me, his crimson eyes glowing with hatred. He once again raised his staff, but before he could start casting I shouted, "It worked, get over here guys!"

Now I just needed to buy time until my allies arrived. Or so I thought, but it seemed they were already here.

"Brother!"

I glanced over to find Recilia at my side. She never listens! The only way she could have gotten here this fast was if she'd started moving before confirming the Sacred Ash was effective. While it had worked against the Elder Lich in-game, I knew I couldn't expect what

worked in the game to work here 100%.

I told you to wait by the room's entrance until I was certain the Sacred Ash worked!

Part of me wanted to scold her for not sticking to the plan, but right now I was just glad she'd gotten here so fast.

As the Elder Lich started his incantation, Recilia flung another handful of Sacred Ash at him. Once again, the Elder Lich staggered backwards and screamed in pain.

"Hmph!"

Right as the Elder Lich began to recover Prana swiftly ran up and threw yet more ash at him.

"Have some of this!" Next up was Radd.

"Gotcha!" After that was Nyuuk, who was panting heavily from the exertion of keeping up with his more agile allies.

Finally, it was Mana's turn.

"All right Mana, it's all up to you!"

"On it!"

Mana was the one with the strongest anti-undead spells among all of us. However, it wasn't an offensive light-magic spell she was about to hit the Elder Lich with, oh no.

"Regeneration!"

Mana's true forte was healing magic!

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The Elder Lich writhed in pain as healing light poured down on him. Undead healed from dark-aspected attacks, but on the other hand they took damage from regular healing spells. Regeneration was a healing over time spell that healed a flat percentage of the target's health every few seconds. Normally the Elder Lich would have far too much HP for us to kill, but with this strategy we could take him down!

The Elder Lich turned his hate-filled eyes on Mana and raised his staff. "Soul—"

"Not so fast! Take this!" I'd managed to prepare another batch of Sacred Ash in the time everyone else had been throwing some, and once again the Elder Lich had his spell interrupted.

"Haah!" Recilia then threw her next batch.

"Hmph!" Then Prana did.

"Hiyaaaah!" Then Radd.

"Gotcha!" Then Nyuuk.

"Hup!"

Then finally Mana threw her bundleful of Sacred Ash, keeping the Elder Lich stunned for a solid ten seconds. By the time it recovered and started casting, we'd once again prepared our next batches of Sacred Ash. By having rotating volleys of Sacred Ash, we were able to completely seal the Elder Lich's attacks. One of this world's strongest

bosses was destroyed by a simple Regeneration spell while unable to do a single thing.

“Necro—”

“Take this!”

“Haaah!”

“Hmph!”

“Hiyaaaah!”

“Gotcha!”

“Hup!”

“Death To—”

“Take this!”

“Haaah!”

“Hmph!”

“Hiyaaaah!”

“Gotcha!”

“Hup!”

“Abyss Ga—”

“Take this!”

“Haaah!”

“Hmph!”

“Hiyaaaah!”

“Gotcha!”

“*Hup!*”

Chapter 5: A New Trial

“Gyaaaaaaah!”

The Elder Lich let out an earsplitting cry as the last of his health was depleted, granting him a second death. Since he was the boss of one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness, he had a really flashy death animation. I let out a small sigh of relief once his long and protracted death sequence came to an end, confirming that the Elder Lich was gone for good. After a few seconds, I noticed that Radd had an odd expression on his face.

Our eyes met, and he awkwardly said, “I mean, this was how the plan was supposed to go so I’m not complaining, but this boss kind of felt like a letdown.”

“We found a clever way to beat an enemy we would normally never stand a chance against. That’s something to be proud of.”

I understood why Radd felt dissatisfied, but we had truly earned this victory. Besides, while their weaknesses weren’t quite as dramatic, the other bosses of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness all had easily exploitable weak points that let you one-sidedly whale on them. Some were weak to petrification, others only cast magic and could be silenced, and so on. Of course, with each boss you eliminated the remaining ones steadily lost those weaknesses. Also, even this Sacred Ash spamming strategy wasn’t as easy to execute as we’d made it seem. If you tried it in the game sometimes your NPC allies didn’t time their throws right, or inserted a random action in between uses of Sacred Ash. And once the rhythm was broken, the Elder Lich could easily use that one opening to destroy your party.

“I know, but it feels like anyone could have done this. It’s not like I did anything special...” Radd muttered.

“That’s where you’re wrong. How many people do you think would be able to keep their cool when going up against an enemy as terrifying as the Elder Lich, and trust in the ridiculous sounding plan I’d concocted? I’ll tell you right now, you guys are the only ones.”

Radd looked up at me in surprise. “W-Well I guess when you put it that way, old man...” he trailed off, bashfully averting his gaze. He got like this whenever I praised him, but right now there was something a lot more important than his mood happening.

“Anyway, this is where the fun begins.”

“Hm?”

Radd gave me a confused look, and I pointed at the spot where the Elder Lich had disappeared.

“Remember what I said? Our ultimate goal here is to get some rare items.”

Every one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness’ bosses dropped a unique item when killed. The Elder Lich was considered one of the stronger bosses and had two possible drops. A circlet or a staff. Both of them were among the best pieces of equipment in the game, and there were two possible future paths I could take everyone down depending on which one dropped.

“Ooooooh...”

The particles of light the Elder Lich had dissolved into finally faded, and two pieces of equipment fell to the ground with twin metallic clangs. The circlet the Elder Lich had been wearing as well as the ruby red staff he’d been using lay there before us.

“We got...both drops?” I muttered in shock.

As impossible as it seemed, we’d acquired both the circlet and the staff.

I can’t believe we got both!

In the game, I’d only ever gotten a single drop from the boss so I’d often had to reset multiple times until I got the drop I’d been looking for. However, killing powerful bosses like these over and over was so stressful that most players hadn’t bothered, and of course in this world it wasn’t like I could reset in the first place. I wasn’t completely sure why the Elder Lich had dropped both items here, but I suspected it might have been because whoever had created this world had thought it contradictory that the boss possessed both pieces of equipment yet dropped only one of them. Either way, this was a very happy miscalculation.

The crown containing all the fell sorcerer’s wisdom, the Lunatic Circlet, and the staff from which flowed all-consuming hellfire, the Fell Crimson Rod—both of these items had some difficult to master gimmicks, but they were every bit as powerful as their grandiose descriptions claimed. The fact that I’d gotten both of them had made this dungeon delve a truly worthwhile one. Humming, I grabbed the circlet and staff and chucked them into my Inventory.

“Brother!” Recilia suddenly shouted.

I turned in the direction Recilia was pointing and saw...

“Th-The wall...”

The far wall—which was supposed to have been a dead end—rumbled ominously and started to slowly sink into the ground. Behind the wall was the true final room of this dungeon.

“Ulp.”

Mana gagged and covered her mouth as a wave of dark miasma

radiated out from the room. It was so thick it was visible. In the center of that darkness-filled room was a pitch-black statue that looked as if it had all of the world's evil crammed into it.

"O-Old man..." Radd muttered.

"What you see right there is a statue of the evil god."

A statue of Rasulfi, and the amount of dark power radiating from it was a portent of his looming return. Destroying them was supposed to be the goal of all adventurers, and we silently stared at the statue for a few minutes. Before we could compose ourselves, the room with the statue was suddenly filled with light.

"Wh-What now?!" Radd screamed.

The light began to coalesce into the form of a person.

"Is that..." Radd's voice trembled.

Floating in front of us was a translucent woman made of light. She showed no hostility—in fact she was smiling warmly at us. But I knew why Radd was so shocked. The woman had an unearthly beauty to her. Her golden eyes were filled with bottomless love, and her face was perfect, as if it had been sculpted by a master craftsman. Her hair, too, was golden-blond, and framed her body exquisitely. Everything from her eyebrows to her lips was absolutely perfect.

"Finales, the Goddess of Salvation..." I whispered.

No one in this world was supposed to know her name, at least not yet. Fortunately, it seemed no one, including Finales herself, heard my soft whisper. Either that or she heard and chose not to say anything. Regardless, while we were all still staring in awe the goddess spoke.

"I have been waiting for you," she said in a gentle voice. "I have been waiting for you for a very long time, my beloved children of light." The goddess spread her arms wide, smiling at us as if we were long-lost lovers.

"Muster your courage, my children. Touch the accursed statue and clear away its darkness." Her cadence had a musical quality to it that serenaded our ears.

I turned to look at the statue enshrined in the center of the room. This was where the crux of *BB's* main plot started. The Twelve Ruins of Darkness weren't cleared when you killed their bosses. Someone in your main party had to touch the statue at their depths and destroy it for the dungeon to truly be cleared. Destroying the statue allowed Finales to regain control of the place, and weaken the strength of the evil god. But at the same time, destroying the statue unleashed a wave of miasma across the world, strengthening all of the monsters in it. In a way though, strengthening the world's monsters was a necessity to beat the game. The stronger your enemies got, the more experience you gained from them. It was an ironic twist of fate that in order to defeat the source of all evil, Rasulfi, you needed the waves of power

he radiated across the world.

However, you needed to be careful when choosing which of your party members touched the statue to destroy it. Upon destroying the statue, the goddess bestowed a blessing upon you, but only the person who actually destroyed the statue got that blessing. The blessing was generally a skill or ability or stat buff that was related to the cleared dungeon in some way.



If I recalled correctly, the reward for this dungeon was a big buff to Mind. Mind affected the potency of healing magic as well as magic defense. It was obvious which one of us was most suited to receive this particular blessing.

“Re— Old man.” Radd quietly called out to me. “Are you sure about this?”

I turned back to see him standing awkwardly to one side.

He didn’t need to specify what he meant by “this.” I’d already told everyone about what would happen if we managed to beat the boss of this dungeon.

“Yep. Take it away, Radd.”

I nodded, and Radd timidly stepped forward. Just before he entered the room he turned back to his comrades.

“H-Here I go,” he said in a trembling voice.

Everyone gathered around Radd, and the goddess smiled protectively down at him.

“It seems you’ve made your decision. Come my child, muster your courage and touch the statue. Bring us all one step closer to destroying the evil god’s— Hm? Wait, why are you taking an item out right now? I-Is that a gift for me? I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t need it, really. This body of mine is illusory so I have no use for offerings. Besides, the statue takes— Wait a moment! Is that a set of Recall Wings?! P-Put that back! If you use that now you’ll end up back at the start of the dungeon! All of your hard work will go up in smoke! Put that away this instant! Are you scared of what you might find in that room? F-Fear not, it’s just dark to make it seem like a fitting location for an evil god’s statue! There’s nothing dangerous in there! I promise the darkness won’t have any adverse effects on your bodies! C-Come now, there’s nothing to be scared of. Hey, wait you, the man in all black! Why are you waving goodbye to me?! This isn’t farewell; we haven’t even gotten started yet! Hey, get back—!”

And so, we teleported out of the dungeon after killing its boss and claiming his drops. All in all, it was a resounding success.

We’d beaten the Elder Lich with the perfect strategy, escaped the dungeon while the goddess was watching us, and then gone to a few of the other Ruins of Darkness and scoured them for items as well. The Twelve Ruins of Darkness were designed to get harder and harder the more of them that got cleared. However, the dungeons were only considered by the game to be cleared once you actually destroyed the statues at their center. So long as you didn’t do that all the other dungeons remained set at their initial difficulty level. And their initial

difficulty level was level 25. At our current levels we could easily blast through them and get all the items we wanted. This was great, because the chests in the Twelve Ruins of Darkness mostly had fixed drops. In other words, you got the same things regardless of whether you showed up when the monsters were weak or strong.

It would have been nice to be able to get all the boss drops as well, but I guess I can't be too greedy.

Unfortunately, the bosses of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness powered up the moment any of the other bosses were defeated, not when the dungeons themselves were cleared. As a result, you couldn't just cheese all of them and collect all of the best equipment at the start. Either the devs had accounted for this possibility from the start, or one of their testers had tried to do what I was doing and they'd patched out that exploit before release. It was possible that in the transition to making the game world a real one that particular quirk of boss power ups had been removed, but it was far too risky to test. There was also the problem that the ruins were pretty spread out, so we were only able to grab items from the ones relatively close to Freelea. I did float the possibility of traveling to the ones in other regions, but Radd and the others seemed against it so decided to put it off for now.

In the end, we were still able to gather a respectable hoard of rare items, including the Elder Lich's two drops.

"Things are going pretty smoothly so far."

My initial infinite grinding plan had failed, but as a result my backup plan had gotten everyone to an even higher level than I'd initially planned to. We'd also managed to go through two of the twelve ruins and get a good number of rare items and intermediate-tier equipment. All of that equipment would come in handy during the tournament. Now Radd and the others just needed to get more experience in their classes and learn their Class Skills, and they'd have the levels, stats, equipment, and skills to potentially aim for a victory in the tournament to determine the world's strongest fighter.

"Have I really gotten that much stronger...?" Radd muttered, looking unhappily down at himself. Noticing that everyone had heard him and was now staring at him, Radd hurriedly added, "Oh, m-my bad. I'm not trying to say everything we've done up till now has been a waste or anything. It's just..." Radd's expression fell even further. "After I saw Recilia and the old man fighting in that first dungeon, I felt like I was still a small fry."

"Radd..."

Shit, what should I say here? I hadn't expected my sideshow with Recilia to cause Radd to lose confidence in himself. I was planning on divvying out the spoils next, but reassuring Radd came first.

“If you think you’re not strong enough, then get stronger.”

“Huh?”

Radd was making steady progress in his manual Arts activation training. What he needed most right now to get stronger was live combat experience. Fortunately, I had just the perfect trial in mind for a frontliner like him.

“I’m about to give you a special training course. One that’s going to be so harsh you’re going to hate it by the end. The trial I’m going to have you undergo, Radd, is one that you need to clear to class change into Treasure Hunter.” I sifted through my memories, searching for more concrete information on the trial as I spoke to Radd. “Part of the reason I’m making you do this trial is to give you more combat experience, but it’s also about time you found a new class to change into.”

Right now, Radd’s class was Brave Leo, which was a special upgrade to the Young Leo class you unlocked by swapping to Young Leo with certain weapons or armor equipped. You could unlock it relatively early, so its stat growths were on par with a fourth-tier regular class. It was a great class for the lower levels, but now that Radd was level 30 and had the stats to pick any fourth-tier class he wanted it wasn’t all that special. In fact, since it was one of the more balanced class types it was actually worse than some of the generic fourth-tier classes.

“In fairness, Treasure Hunter is a class with relatively balanced growths as well. But it’s a far more useful unique class. Its stat gain bonus spread is a bit less balanced than Brave Leo, and it just gives more bonuses period. And there’s nothing more important than having good growths,” I added with a self-deprecating laugh.

Radd cocked his head to one side and asked, “That reminds me, didn’t you say that there’s a way to keep raising your stats even after you reach level 99, old man? If you can make up the difference at level 99, wouldn’t it make more sense to pick a class with crappy growths so that you have lower stats and level up faster? You’d be able to learn better skills sooner that way too.”

You’ve got a sharp eye to pick up on that. Unfortunately, that’s not a very realistic option.

“It’s too reckless to try and continue leveling when your stats aren’t very high. Monsters start scaling really harshly at the higher levels. Besides, even if you could keep your stats low while leveling at some point the base amount you need to reach the next level is so high the stat modifiers to it make no difference. Most importantly, though...”

“Yeah?”

“At level 99, it takes an absolutely insane amount of experience to

hit the next level. Depending on what your stats look like, it takes 3-10 times as much experience to get another level's worth of stats as it did to get from level 98 to level 99."

"Th-Then..." Radd paled as the implications dawned on him.

"Raising your stats at level 99 is waaaay harder than raising them before 99."

"Oh god..."

Honestly grinding stats past level 99 was a feature that only existed for hardcore grinders and people looking to 100% the game. It wasn't a means to make things easier for players who messed up their leveling plans.

"Which is why it's extremely important to always be changing classes to better ones that give better growths."

Radd frowned, and I led him to our destination. I hadn't gone there too often in-game so I was worried I might get lost, but fortunately I was able to spot it easily enough.

"Here we are."

"You sure? There's nothing here."

In reply, I walked up to the rock wall that seemed like a dead end and thrust my hand toward it. The illusory wall faded away as my hand passed through it revealing a dimly lit passage. It was well paved, making it clear that it was man-made.

"How the hell do you know about all of these hidden places, old man?"

I just shrugged and stepped inside. "Oh yeah, you might be able to grant another one of your wishes in here."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

I walked up to the temple that loomed at the end of the passage and looked over at the section marked with a sign that said "the first trial."

There was a pedestal in the center of that wing, and on that pedestal was a knight statue that looked like it might start moving any minute. I used Analyze on it and said, "That knight over there is going to be your teacher for today. He's the perfect training partner who won't break no matter how hard you hit him."

【Trial Guardian】

LV: 45

HP: ∞

MP: ∞

Attack: 1

Magic Attack: 0

Defense: 999

Magic Defense: 999
Strength: 1
Vitality: 999
Intelligence: 0
Mind: 999
Agility: 100
Focus: 100

We went inside the temple, and I watched on with a smile and Recilia and Radd looked around in amazement. I thought back to what I'd read about the temple in-game and said,

“A legendary treasure hunter from ages past cooperated with one of the gods to create this temple, as a way to pass his knowledge and skills down to future generations. This isn't actually a dungeon; it's a class change temple just like the one in Freelea.”

“This is...a temple?” Radd muttered, staring at the walls and ceiling in awe.

“This means there's no monsters here. In fact, the only thing you can do here is class change to Treasure Hunter. There's no hidden cache of treasure, and no special way of farming experience. The Treasure Hunter class comes in quite handy while adventuring since it has a lot of skills to help you find hidden passages and traps and so on.”

It also had useful monster luring skills like Whistleblower, which created a decoy that emitted shock waves that caused no damage but aggroed monsters. Furthermore, it had skills like Master Gatherer that let you gather remotely from gathering nodes and harvest multiple nodes at once. It also had a skill called Gathering Proficiency that made it so you gained 30% more from each gathering node, so it really was a great class for harvesting from dungeons. You could use Whistleblower to drag enemies away from an area and then quickly gather all of the nodes nearby before they returned. None of these skills were absolutely necessary, but they were quite useful for dungeon delving. You always wanted at least one Treasure Hunter in your party.

“H-Hey, I know it'll be helpful for me to have more search skills and all but I want to get stronger as a Fighter, so—”

“Don't worry, I've taken that into account as well. Treasure Hunter does have a lot of skills that help with exploration, but the original Treasure Hunter who made this temple was a better fighter than he was a lockpicker or explorer. Apparently he went into dungeons heavily armed and armored, and powered his way through traps with sword and spear more often than he cleverly dismantled or

avoided them. Like I said before, the class's growth bonuses will give you more combat-related stats than Brave Leo does."

"I-It sounds like this guy wasn't really a treasure hunter at all."

I'd thought the same when I'd first read about the history of this place, but it was the truth.

"Anyway, no monsters show up here, and there's nothing that can kill you. This place is basically a theme park."

"What's a theme park?" Radd asked, and I gave him a small smile.

"A playground, basically. I hope you'll have a fun time here."

As I said that, I strode toward the center of the temple. There was another big pedestal there, and words had been carved into the plaque at its base.

【You who wish to inherit my strength and my will.
Grasp the flameless key, and overcome my three trials.】

I raised a hand, and the pedestal began to glow with a faint light. A second later, a jade bead attached to a thin string dropped into my outstretched palm.

"Is that the flameless key?" Recilia asked, and I nodded.

"That's right. You have to clear the trials and transform it into a proper complete key but..." None of that mattered right now. "Let me teach you why I called this place a playground."

I started walking over to where the first trial awaited.

The small plaque sitting at the fork of the path that wound through the temple read:

【First Trial】 - Elude the knight's blade and light the key's first flame.

It was clear what the plaque meant by "the knight." The path was a solid three meters wide, and there were statues of knights lining both sides of the road.

This really takes me back. I used to come here all the time back when I was playing BB.

When you came here for the first time you were on edge, wondering which of the statues would spring to life and attack you, but I'd come here so often that I didn't even need to use Analyze to figure that out. At the end of the path was a room housing a pedestal that looked identical to the one in the main temple, though this one was glowing bright red instead of yellow. It was very clearly the end goal for this trial.

"Now then..."

I equipped Iron Swords in both hands, and took a step toward the pedestal. Immediately, the third knight on the right side of the road moved to block my path, its stone boots thudding heavily against the ground. The statue looked quite similar to the Knight of Sorrow that I'd used to create infinite enemies for Radd and the others to farm, but that boss had been a living suit of metal armor while this was a moving stone statue. As a result, it was much heavier than the Knight of Sorrow. Despite its sluggish appearance though, it hefted its stone halberd with surprising agility.

【Trial Guardian】

LV: 45

HP: ∞

MP: ∞

Attack: 1

Magic Attack: 0

Defense: 999

Magic Defense: 999

Strength: 1

Vitality: 999

Intelligence: 0

Mind: 999

Agility: 100

Focus: 100

I checked its stats again, marveling at how lopsided its stat spread was. It had insane defenses and a negligible amount of attack. In fact, it had even less attack than a generic goblin, the weakest monster in *BB*.

Its stats made it seem harmless, but of course if that was the case there wouldn't be much of a trial. During the trial, anyone attempting it took no damage from the knight. However, any damage they would have taken from the knight's attacks was transferred to the key, which shattered upon taking even a single point of damage. The goal of this trial was making it to the pedestal while avoiding every single attack.

Simple enough, but accomplishing such a feat wasn't as easy as it seemed. You could dodge attacks, but you couldn't afford to guard any of them. Guarding reduced the damage you took, but it never nullified it. Furthermore, you couldn't count on parrying either. The knight's attacks were all Arts or skills, so a regular parry with a standard weapon would still let some damage through. There was one trick you could use though.

"V-Slash!" I shouted, countering the spear Art the knight unleashed with an Art of my own.

You see, when two Arts clashed, the weaker Art was repelled. Since the Trial Guardian had an Attack stat of just one, that meant any Art you countered with would be stronger than anything it could use. The knight staggered back as its halberd was knocked aside, but I didn't press my advantage. There wasn't any point considering it had a defense of 999. In fact, its defense was so high that most regular attacks would just bounce off, leaving me momentarily vulnerable.

"Lightning Slice! Flashcut!"

I predicted the knight's next two attacks and countered them perfectly. After the knight got countered for the third time, its spear began to glow.

Too bad, I already know all of your tricks! Dropping into a low stance, I took one step forward.

"Wave Thrust!"

I used a spear skill that had a knockback effect on the stone knight, pushing it back a few steps. After repelling the knight's attacks three times it used a buffed glowing red Art that couldn't be countered. The only way to avoid it was to displace the knight and interrupt it in the middle of its Art motion before the attack actually registered. After that it was back to countering regular attacks.

"Tri-Edge! *Tsubame Gaeshi!*"

With every attack I countered the knight was forced a few steps back, bringing it closer and closer to the room with the pedestal. After dozens of counters, and interrupting a couple more red skills I finally managed to get the knight halfway toward the room.

"V-Slash! Typhoon Blade!"

Right as he hit the halfway point there was another resounding thud, and another one of the stone statues stepped in front of me.

"And this is where it gets hard," I muttered, grinning as I watched the two knights advance toward me, their halberds raised.

The sound of stone against metal resounded throughout the temple as my swords clashed against the knights' halberds over and over. The two knights were in perfect sync, thrusting their halberds in unison each time. But that wouldn't be enough to best me. There might be two foes, but I also had two weapons equipped.

"Which means it's basically a 2v2!"

I was using different Arts with each sword, countering both knights' Arts at the same time. Suddenly the left knight's halberd began to glow red while the right knight brought its halberd down in a vertical swing. I used a thrust Art to stagger the left knight and countered the right knight's downward slash with an uppercut Art of my own. While I moved both arms independently, I kept perfect track of the cooldown timers of all the Arts I was using. Since cooldowns were tied to the user and not the weapon, if I used an Art with my

right hand I couldn't use that with my left hand until the cooldown recovered. I needed to match each of the knights' attacks perfectly or I'd lose my key instantly.

Counter, counter, counter, displace. Displace, counter, counter, counter.

I got into a rhythm for repelling both knights, but I had to spam so many Arts that my arms were getting tired. Despite my exhaustion though, I was having a blast.

"Ha ha ha ha!"

My thoughts were sharper than ever and there was tons of adrenaline flooding my system so I barely even felt the tiredness. As a kid I'd always dreamed of going toe to toe against a formidable foe that required every ounce of skill and ingenuity I could muster. And unlike the deadly encounters I'd had thus far, I didn't have to fear for my life if I messed up here. I could treat this trial like the game it was.

"God this is so much fun!" Laughing, I swung my swords with practiced precision.

Displace, counter, counter, displace...

"Huh?"

Suddenly, my rhythm broke, as I accidentally swung my sword too far, and it hit one of the knight statues on the side of the road that was just a stone statue and not an enemy.

"Shit!"

I was a second too late to recover, and that one second cost me victory.

Clang! The knight's halberd hit me in the chest, and the jewel that was the key shattered into a thousand pieces.

"These guys are so mechanical," I muttered as I watched the knights head back to their original posts. The moment the jewel had shattered they'd lost all interest in me. I wanted to get back at them for hitting me, but they were practically impervious, and even if I could damage them they'd get reset to their original state the moment someone attempted the challenge again. There was no point in doing anything to them. Sighing, I put away my swords and went back to the central room where Radd and Recilia waited.

"That was well done, brother," Recilia said.

She and Radd had been watching me intently the whole time.

Feeling a little embarrassed about the fact that I'd lost, I awkwardly cleared my throat and said, "As you can see, these guys are perfect for training your Arts technique. Oh, also if you manage to get a few hits in on them, that'll help get you some class experience on the side."

Radd and Recilia stared quietly at me for a few seconds. I couldn't tell what was going through their heads, but finally Radd looked up at me and said, "After watching that, I was reminded of just how godlike a swordsman you are, old man."

"Y-You think so?" Radd was always bad-mouthing me, so it took me by surprise to hear such heartfelt praise from him.

Radd looked down contemplatively for a few seconds, then met my gaze once more, his eyes filled with determination. "But I'm gonna catch up to you one day, just you wait! In fact, I'm going to surpass you!"

In a solemn voice I said, "Well, good luck."

"Hmph, you think I'm not even worth worrying about yet, don't you? Just you wait, I'll knock your socks off before long!"

Radd misinterpreted the intent behind my words, but in truth I had absolute faith that he'd surpass me eventually. In fact...

"I'm going next. I'll push those knights back even further than you did!"

As I lapsed into thought, Radd strode forward and raised a hand toward the pedestal. The jewel which gave him the right to undertake the trials dropped into his hand, and he headed to the path where the first trial was.

"Don't forget about me," Recilia said, making it clear that Radd wasn't the only one fired up about surpassing me.

"Recilia..."

As Radd walked away, Recilia said in a quiet voice, "I'm not particularly interested in becoming the strongest fighter in the world or anything. However..." As always, her voice was calm, but I could see the intensity in her eyes. "I want to protect you, brother. Which is why I'll become stronger than everyone, including you."

She was as pumped up as Radd was for sure.

"That aside..." she said suddenly, her expression returning to normal.

"Hm?" I gave her a questioning look.

"It seems like Radd's going to be bashing his head against that trial for some time, so why don't you teach me some more Arts in the meantime?"

"Right here?" I asked, and she averted her gaze slightly.

"We're both free, so it would be a waste not to make use of this time. You've been helping Radd and the others with their training quite a bit the past few days, but I haven't had any one-on-one training sessions with you recently," she said, speaking quickly to hide her embarrassment.

"You sure you want the person you declared to be your rival to be the one to teach you?"

“If it will help me grow stronger, I care not whether that aid comes from an enemy or an ally.” There was a hint of desperation in her voice. “Of course, if you don’t want to I won’t force”

“Nah, I don’t mind at all,” I said with a smile.

If I was being honest, I was scared of how quickly Recilia and Radd were catching up to me. But I’d sworn to make the people around me as strong as possible while getting stronger myself, and I didn’t want to break that promise.

“I won’t hold back though, so be ready,” I added.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way!”

We both drew our blades, ready to start our first training session in a good long while, and—

“Goddamnit! I lost so quickly! Huh? Uhh, why are you glaring at me like that?”

Radd came back before we could start, having been taken out by the knight in less than ten seconds. Recilia glared at him as if he’d killed her parents, not even bothering to hide her irritation.

Chapter 6: Radd's Tribulations

This is so disheartening...

I sighed as I watched the jewel pinned to my collar shatter again and trudged back to the temple's central room. For the dozenth time, I grabbed a new jewel and staggered back to the first trial area. As I left the central room, I caught a bit of Rex and Recilia's conversation.

"The motion goes like this. Think you can do it?"

"As always, your ability to use Arts is so amazing it disgusts me, brother."

"You little... I was going to teach you a killer combo you can do with this Art, but I guess you don't need it."

"I was simply giving you my heartfelt praise. I think you should learn to have a bigger heart and forgive small slips of the tongue."

Hearing how much fun the two of them seemed to be having during their training just made me feel even more pathetic.

What's wrong with those two?! They start flirting if you leave them alone for even five minutes!

I knew it wasn't fair of me to get mad at them, so I swallowed my anger and stepped onto the path with the knights.

The first stone statue moved to bar my path, and I raised the shield in my left hand. At first I'd wanted to be like Rex and beat back the knight's halberd with my sword, but I'd been taken out in seconds trying that. Seeing Rex's swordsmanship had gotten my blood pumping, but I couldn't fight the way he did—at least not yet. It had taken ten attempts where I'd lost almost instantly to learn that lesson, but I'd learned it in the end. It hadn't helped that every time I slinked back to get another jewel, defeated, Recilia would give me a disdainful look.

Deflecting an Art with another Art seemed like it should be simple, but it was way harder than it looked. In order to pull it off you needed to carefully observe your opponent's movements, accurately predict the trajectory of their attack, and pick the right Art which would perfectly intersect with the trajectory of the opponent's Art. This was hard not only because this stupid stone knight had a ton of attack patterns, but also because some of them couldn't be countered by activating an Art normally. You had to angle some of them to get the counter just right. The worst was the vertical swing the knight did after raising its halberd above its head. There were practically no Arts

that could counter that trajectory in their default state.

If I tried stopping it with a plain old V-Slash, the halberd would dip right through my V and hit me on the head. I knew if I angled my V-Slash I'd be able to stop the halberd, but so far I'd spent all my time practicing basic manual Arts activation and hadn't spent much time working on angling my Arts. I could pull it off against a training dummy if I spent enough time getting the image right in my head, but calculating the right angle and getting the motion right when an enemy attack was coming at me, and I only had a split second to get my Art out was way too hard. To top it all off, even when I did manage to get a rare successful counter, every Art had a cooldown so I couldn't just use V-Slash again to counter the next attack. The more attacks I countered, the fewer options I had left in my arsenal.

I hate to admit it, but right now I just don't have the skill or the experience to fight this guy the way Rex did.

Now that I'd accepted the bitter truth, I'd stopped trying to show off and was trying to slip past the knight and make a mad dash for the pedestal. Unfortunately, the knight's halberd was huge, and it had really fast reaction times too. Dodging to the side wasn't enough to escape the halberd's reach, and if I ran past it right after countering its Art and stunning it for a second it just stabbed me from behind. I'd already been taken out a few times trying both of those methods. But my last defeat had given me an idea. I couldn't match Rex when it came to Art mastery. But there was one thing I had which Rex didn't — a shield.

Rex already told me guarding won't work against this guy. But... I dashed forward, and the waiting stone knight pulled back its halberd to strike. It'll be a thrust from my right!

Thankfully that was the easiest type of attack to deal with, and I stepped forward into the path of the thrust.

Parry!

I blocked the halberd with my shield just in time. Sparks flew as the tip of the halberd scraped against my shield, and though it looked like the halberd might break through for a moment, it was ultimately repelled, and the knight was thrown off-balance.

"Yes!"

Parrying was my solution to the knight's Arts. The timing was strict, but if I got it right I'd stagger the knight for a few seconds longer than if I'd countered its Art with my own. Furthermore, parrying with a shield blocked all damage, even from Arts, so my jewel stayed safe. Of course, I couldn't celebrate just yet. Maintaining the momentum of my charge, I dashed past the stone knight. Chills ran down my spine as I heard it brandish its halberd once more, but this time around I managed to put enough distance between us that it

missed.

Keep going! Don't stop for even a second!

I spurred myself forward as fast as I could. I hadn't forgotten that there were two knights I needed to get past. If they pincer me from both sides I was doomed. Which meant I had to get past the knight in front of me before the one from behind caught up. There was a loud thud as the second knight stepped onto the path.

This is it, the moment of truth!

The time before last, I'd gotten this far and tried to dash past him while he was still getting into position, but I'd just been stabbed in the back for it. Last time I'd stopped in my tracks and tried to time the perfect parry, but that had given the knight behind me enough time to catch up and stab me in the back.

I can't just ignore this guy, but I can't stand still and wait for him to attack either. So instead I needed to keep moving while also somehow stopping this guy in his tracks.

I tossed aside the shield in my left hand and grasped the jewel pinned to my collar.

"Get outta my waaay!"

Screaming at the top of my lungs, I manually activated the only Art I knew that could knock opponents back—Wave Thrust. The second knight had only just finished getting onto the path so it had no opportunity to dodge, which I took full advantage of. My sword found its mark, but I knew the knockback would only stun the knight for a few seconds. As I dashed past the knight I could sense it already readying its halberd.

Let me make iiiiit!

An instant before the knight's halberd hit me, my outstretched left hand, which was holding onto the jewel, reached the pedestal. The jewel began to glow as the light from the pedestal entered it. After a few seconds it faded, and one of the two black holes in the jewel was now filled with light.

"I...did it?"

I slowly turned around and saw the knight frozen in place, its halberd millimeters from my back. I gulped, but then the knight turned on its heel as if nothing had happened and returned to its original post. It stood there unmoving, almost as if it was just a statue.

"H-Ha ha ha. I did it!"

The reality of my victory sunk in, and I rushed back to the central room, waving the glowing jewel in my hand.

"Master—I mean, old man! I did it! I finally cleared the first trial!"

At first Rex looked at me in surprise, but then he smiled. "Well done, Radd. Next up..."

He pointed to a road that lay in the opposite direction of where

the first trial had been. The road had the exact same layout with rows of stone statues on either side. The only difference was that the plaque in front of it read “Second Trial.”

“You have to get past four knights. Good luck.”

Almost as if his voice had triggered them, two knights stepped onto the path and stared menacingly at me.

The only difference between the first and second trials was that the second trial had double the amount of knights barring your path. In the first trial you started off facing one knight and another one appeared as you got farther in; in the second you started off facing two, and another two appeared later on. At first I’d despaired, but to my surprise the plan I’d used for the first trial more or less worked for the second trial as well. All I had to do was close in toward one knight and parry it. Assuming it had done the right attack, I could run past it while it was stunned and as long as I positioned myself properly the other knight would be blocked by the first one and be unable to reach me. Now I just had to pray I could get the right attack twice in a row to get past both sets of knights.

I’m not really a fan of relying on luck like this, but...I can’t think of any other plan.

Unfortunately, if you failed the second trial you had to start over from the first one. Still, I managed to get the right attack pattern in a dozen or so attempts, and successfully filled the other jewel’s hole with light.

Only one trial left now.

I was starting to run out of steam, but I still dutifully trudged back to the central room, my jewel glowing with the light of the previous two trials.

“Please don’t tell me the final trial has triple the amount of knights,” I muttered, half expecting that to be the case.

Fortunately, I was proven wrong. Like the first two trials, you could reach the final trial from the central room. But unlike the first two, the path was barred by a large door. There was a plaque on the ground in front of the door that read:

【Final Trial】 – I await you at the end of the Dragon’s Path. Show me your courage and offer the completed key to me.

“The Dragon’s Path, huh?”

I had no idea what that meant, but I could tell this would be a very different trial from the first two. Though I had a sneaking

suspicion I wouldn't like what lay beyond that door. Still, I did as Rex said and raised the jewel up to it. It slowly inched open with a loud rumbling.

"Wha?!"

The room beyond the door looked nothing like the ones in the first two trials. There was a winding, twisted road only ten centimeters wide that spanned a pit so deep I couldn't see the bottom.

"I guess this is what he meant by Dragon's Path."

The road did indeed resemble a dragon. After all, dragons were simply huge snakes that flew in the sky, and this road was as winding as a snake, and "flying" over a seemingly bottomless pit. I took a few breaths to calm myself down, then started examining the room more thoroughly. For all its twisting and winding, the path did indeed lead to the back of the room. The far wall was engraved with a huge carving of a dragon, and there was a familiar pedestal enshrined beneath that carving. If the past two trials were anything to go by, I cleared this one by getting the jewel onto that pedestal.

There was nothing I could use as a foothold except for the Dragon's Path, and at no point did that path widen or narrow except at the very center of the room where it became one-meter wide for a bit. That was likely the path's midpoint, and the only resting spot you'd get during the whole ordeal. Looking down, all I saw was darkness. Rex had told me there was no danger of dying here, but that didn't make the pit any less scary.

"Well, the sign did say 'Show me your courage.' It's going to take a lot of courage to walk down this path for sure."

Even though I knew the fall wouldn't kill me, I definitely did not want to end up down there. Still, this seems pretty doable. This was a completely different trial from the previous ones, and it came with its own set of challenges for sure, but they weren't insurmountable. The path was narrow, and a single slip would send me tumbling into the abyss, but I was confident in my balance and I wasn't particularly afraid of heights. Growing up, I'd climbed my fair share of trees. If the first two trials had been testing whether or not I had the combat sense to be a Treasure Hunter, this final one was probably testing whether or not I could be light on my feet and navigate a dungeon full of traps to reach the treasure at the end. That suited me just fine though.

I'll beat this one first try!

If I messed up here I'd have to start over again from the first trial. Which meant I'd also have to clear that hellish second trial again as well. More than anything though, I was tired of Recilia's judgmental stares.

I slapped my cheeks to fire myself up and took the first step onto the Dragon's Path.

“All right, looks like I made it halfway,” I muttered, wiping sweat off my brow.

Maintaining perfect concentration while going down this narrow path was more exhausting than I thought it’d be. Any time I glanced down the vertigo made me dizzy, and when arrows had started flying at me from the walls I thought I was a goner. Fortunately, I’d heard the arrows in time and had reflexively frozen in place. The arrows had flown inches in front of me, and I’d just barely escaped with my life. There had been other arrow traps, but after the first time I was ready for them, and they proved to be easy enough to evade. It was mentally taxing to stay focused for so long, but I finally managed to make it to the one meter wide platform in the middle.

I can’t let my guard down though.

I glanced around the room, making note of any grooves in the wall where more arrow traps might be waiting. As far as I could tell, there were no traps set into the Dragon’s Path itself.

Just a little farther...

I glared at the pedestal, which looked so close, but that I knew was still very far away. The pedestal wasn’t as fancy as the other two had been, but it looked positively holy to me. I could tell I was getting a little impatient because the final goal was in sight. Thankfully though, this trial had no time limit. I took some time to calm myself down and gather my wits, then continued on the path, carefully spending a few seconds on each step. After a few steps, I heard an ominous, all too familiar thud behind me. It was the sound of a human-sized statue made of stone hitting the ground, and it was the absolute last sound I wanted to hear right now.

“Please no...” I muttered in a trembling voice. Cold sweat poured down my forehead.

You have got to be fucking kidding me! I shouted inside my head, but aloud I just muttered “Of course...” in a defeated voice.

Slowly, I looked over my shoulder. Standing on the one-meter-wide platform I’d been resting on just a few minutes ago was a stone knight. Its knees were bent to absorb the impact of its landing, but I knew it would straighten up and come after me soon enough.

Where the hell did that thing even come from?!

I looked up, and saw a glowing red magic circle in the sky. It was clear the knight had been summoned from there.

That’s just not fair!

The knight raised its head and stared at me.

“Nooo!”

I didn’t entertain the thought of fighting that thing for even a

second. I hadn't been able to fight evenly with the knights; even during the first trial, there was no way in hell I could manage it on this narrow path. Furthermore, the stone knight staring me down now was clearly much stronger than the ones I'd faced so far. Not only was it twice their size, it had a spear in its right hand and a longsword in its left instead of the single halberd the other knights wielded. It had all the room in the world to maneuver since it was on the wider platform, while I was stuck on the narrow path. There was no way I could fight that thing.

"Goddamnit!"

I started running, hoping to put as much distance between me and the knight as I could. I was already so close to the goal. The pedestal was only a few meters away as the crow flies. If I could just shake the knight off and reach the pedestal then I'd be free of this hell trial.

"Ah..." I looked over my shoulder and saw the knight draw its arm back as he prepared to throw its spear like a javelin. "Don't—!"

I didn't even have time to react. The spear hurtled toward me at blistering speed and struck me square in the back, shattering my jewel.

"Uwaaah!"

The impact caused me to lose my balance, and I tumbled into the bottomless abyss.

I fell for what felt like ages, but was probably closer to ten seconds, or perhaps even less than that. Before I knew it though, some form of magic had teleported me back to the central room, where I lay sprawled out on the ground. Even though I'd taken a direct hit from the knight's spear and fallen from an insane height, I was completely unhurt. Despite my lack of physical injuries though, I couldn't bring myself to get up.

"That's cheating..." I muttered angrily.

Of course, I knew I was just being a sore loser.

Fuck! Thinking back on it now, I'd completely fallen for the final trial's trick.

The first two trials had been quite difficult, so I'd let my guard down when the final one had started off so much easier. I'd thought I'd understood the gist of the final trial, but that misunderstanding was exactly what the trial's designer was after. He'd wanted people to think that after the first two difficult trials the final one was a simple test of concentration that took time but would be relatively easier to clear. The arrow traps, too, had been designed to be just barely avoidable when you were taken by surprise upon seeing them for the first time. That made challengers think that was the main danger of the final trial, and they didn't consider other options. The nastiest part of the whole trick was that the knight came after you passed the

midpoint platform, when you were thinking that just maybe you'd finally be free from this gauntlet of trials.

That's the moment you let your guard down the most, which is why it's the perfect moment to spring one final trap!

Humans were at their most vulnerable when they finally found a ray of hope. There was also the psychological pressure of knowing you couldn't afford to fail because of how much effort you'd already put in, and how close you were to the goal. When you were focused solely on not making any mistakes to avoid slipping up at the end your reactions against the unexpected were dulled.

That trial played me like a damn fiddle!

I slammed my fist against the ground. Understanding how I'd been duped just pissed me off more. But even so, I couldn't muster up the willpower to try that trial again, nor could I think of any way to get past that final hurdle.

Goddammit!

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. After a few seconds I noticed someone standing over me.

"Looks like that knight got you good, Radd."

It was Rex.

"Screw you."

I covered my face with one hand. I didn't want Rex, the master I respected so much, to see me like this.

"I'm trying to think of a plan. Don't bother me."

That was a bald-faced lie. I was completely and utterly defeated. I just didn't want Rex to think I was a lame quitter.

"I see. In that case, why not let me take a crack at it?"

"Huh?" Surprised, I moved my arm off my face and looked up at Rex.

"I don't know if my methods will be of any help to you, but maybe seeing how I handle things will give you some inspiration. At the very least, you can use my techniques as a reference."

He grinned confidently at the closed door beyond which the final trial lay.

I hadn't expected Rex to show me how he'd handle the trial.

He gave me a smile as I got to my feet and said, "The truth is, I actually have some Guild work I have to take care of this afternoon so I'm only going to be able to do one attempt for you."

I gulped audibly. It had taken me countless failures and god knew how many hours to just reach the third trial. But Rex was saying he was going to clear them all in one go without even practicing first.

"No need to look so amazed. You see, there's actually a couple of skills that make these trials quite easy to clear. It's practically cheating, to be honest."

Rex raised his hand up to the pedestal and a new jewel formed in his hand. He then headed toward the first trial, not even bothering to equip any weapons. The way he was acting it was like he was going out for a walk in the park, not challenging an extremely difficult trial.

Then again, for Rex, maybe these trials are just a walk in the park. I had been brought to the brink of despair by these challenges after hours of trial and error. But unlike me Rex was a real hero. He probably wouldn't even break a sweat going through them. The moment I understood that I felt proud to have such an amazing master, but at the same time it pissed me off that he could so easily accomplish what I couldn't.

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Rex stepped onto the path and started giving me a lecture on skills as he waited for the statue to activate. "Activated skills and Arts serve similar functions, but there are a few subtle differences. Arts you can adjust the angle and direction of with manual activation, and you can also use Arts you haven't acquired yet if you master their motions. That makes them sound generally superior to skills, but in truth certain skills have a few unique merits of their own."

Even as the stone statue started advancing on him, Rex didn't stop his explanation. "The skill I'm about to use now is one of those special skills." Rex casually turned to face me, completely ignoring the advancing statue.

"Behold, Crimson Phoenix Kick!"

Rex leapt into the air, jumping well above the knight's head. He paused momentarily in mid-air, and flames wrapped themselves around his right leg. He then started descending, his flaming leg headed straight for the knight's head.

"Huh?"

But to my surprise, Rex's momentum carried him straight past the knight. The knight seemed just as shocked as me, and stiffened up for a few seconds. But then it quickly regained its senses and whirled around to face Rex. Meanwhile Rex was facing away from the knight, his right arm pulled back as if winding up a big punch.

"Shining Palm Thrust!"

There was a loud clang, and the knight was sent flying a solid two meters backwards. I'd thought Rex had been readying a punch but instead he'd just opened his palm behind him and blasted the knight away.

"Umm, what did you just..."

"You mean Crimson Phoenix Kick? As you saw, it's a skill that sends you flying into the air and then hurtling back down with a flaming kick. It's not actually that strong and you're forced to move forward a set distance when you use it so it's hard to actually land a

hit with. But..." Rex grinned mischievously. "That's exactly why you can use it to get behind enemies like I just did. These knights in particular don't have any attacks that hit above them, so they can't do much to stop you."

"H-Ha ha ha..."

I didn't fully understand the explanation Rex had given for the skill he'd used, but I could tell he came up with truly crazy ideas no one else would ever think of.

"By the way, the skill I used right after, Shining Palm Thrust, isn't that hard to acquire. The Martial Artist class learns it. It does pretty crappy damage, but it activates instantly, has decent range, and has a huge knockback tied to it. I hadn't used it before, but seeing how effective it was against that knight I might start incorporating it into more strategies going forward." Rex was still smiling, as if this entire trial was just a game to him. "Skills only ever have one set movement pattern, so they're a lot less versatile than manually activated Arts. But there's some things you can only accomplish with them because they always move you in predetermined ways. For example..." Rex turned back around. "Triple Whirlwind Kick!"

He leapt into the air, spinning around and kicking three times in quick succession. "A lot of martial arts skills let you do crazy acrobatics that surpass regular human limits, and also probably defy the laws of physics. I recommend learning a few and playing around with what they can do."

"Y-Yeah, I guess there's no way you'd be able to jump that high and kick three times without falling unless you were using a skill."

I'd never imagined you could use skills like that to jump behind enemies though.

After a few seconds, I noticed something strange. "Hang on, why isn't that first knight getting back up?"

Indeed, the knight that Rex had sent flying with the palm thrust was still lying on the ground. For a moment I thought the attack had done enough damage to defeat it, but then I remembered Rex had said it did crappy damage.

"Oh, for whatever reason if you knock those knights outside of their trial zone they stop moving. If you manage to lure them out you can neutralize them for the duration of the trial."

"I would have never..."

It was just one surprise after another with Rex. *How did he even learn something like that?*

Rex turned his back on the immobile statue and looked at the room which held this trial's end goal. "I can use Shining Palm Thrust to get rid of the other knight too, but that's no fun." He transferred the jewel into his left hand and equipped a basic Iron Sword—the weakest

of all weapons—in his right hand. I watched on, curious, as he crouched low.

“Watch closely, Radd. This is another way to approach these trials!”

Rex dashed forward, raising his sword high.

Damn, he's fast!

In terms of raw stats, Rex's Agility was 210 while mine was 218. In other words, I was a little faster than him, and if what he said before was right, then after 100 Agility stopped having a huge impact on your speed anyway. In fact, he'd mentioned that your movement speed reached the maximum possible at 150 Agility, so we should both be able to run equally fast. And yet—

“Gale Slash! Wind God's Advent! Divine Thrust!” By stringing together movement Arts, Rex managed to zoom down the passageway faster than I could ever hope to. In fact, he moved so quickly that by the time the second knight activated and started moving forward Rex had already reached the goal.

“And, done!”

Rex raised his jewel up to the pedestal just as the second knight hit the ground with a thud.

“Your usage of Arts is truly freakish, brother,” Recilia said as we made our way back to the main room.

“Why can't you just praise people when they do something cool?”

“Please don't imply that I'm like this to everyone. I only act this way to you, brother.”

As always, Recilia greeted Rex with what seemed like insults, but I knew by now it was just playful banter. The fact that Rex had just breezed through a challenge I had spent ages figuring out a viable strategy for filled me with both admiration and jealousy.

“Well, did that give you any ideas?” Rex asked, turning to me with a smile.

“Well...” He was just trying to be helpful, but before I knew it I was throwing harsh words at him again. “Sure, those skills of yours were impressive, old man! But those tricks won't work on the second trial! What are you planning on doing there, huh?!”

I regretted those words the moment I said them, but to my surprise, Rex averted his gaze and nodded in affirmation.

“Well, it's not impossible to get through the second trial with those same skills and Arts, but you're right that it would be pretty hard. That being said...”

I furrowed my brow, wondering why he was being so hesitant.

Awkwardly, Rex finally said, “The truth is, there's a much safer

way to clear both of these trials, one that doesn't take any effort at all."

"Come again?"



Looking apologetic, Rex walked onto the path of the second trial, and the two stone knights started bearing down on him. They raised their heavy stone halberds, preparing to smash Rex to pieces. Normally, you'd think those attacks would do serious damage, but of course that wasn't how this trial worked.

"You've gotta be kidding me..." I muttered as I watched the two halberds harmlessly land on Rex's shoulders.

He continued forward past the knights as if nothing had happened, still looking quite apologetic. Naturally the two knights stabbed him from behind, but their attacks also accomplished nothing. Shocked, I thought back to what Rex had said a few minutes ago.

"This is the easy way to clear these two trials," Rex said, pulling out an accessory I knew very well. It was a Barrier Ring, the exact same accessory we'd all used in our run through the Rainbow Lava Caverns.

"The jewel only breaks if the person holding it takes an attack that would do damage to them. But since the Barrier Ring redirects that damage to the barrier, that means the jewel stays safe."

That made perfect sense, but there was one problem with that strategy. "But didn't you mention that the Barrier Ring's barrier is really weak? Won't it get destroyed— Oh."

"Seems like you already noticed. That's right, normal attacks will break the barrier in one hit, but these knights only have one attack. Which means..."

"So that's why you said 'As long as I'm wearing this, their attacks will never hurt me,'" I muttered.

Rex casually strolled down the path, ignoring the fact that four stone statues were whaling on him with their extremely heavy halberds. His Barrier Ring protected him completely from their puny attacks. He reached the pedestal and held his jewel up to it, looking apologetic the entire time.



This time when Rex walked back to the central room I didn't have any conflicting feelings. What he'd shown me was so unexpected that I couldn't even bring myself to be jealous.

"Damn, you really are one hell of an old man, you know that?" I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he replied, in the same casual tone as always.

I smiled and thought, *Come to think of it, it’s because of his crazy ideas that I was drawn to him in the first place. It’s why I wanted him to be my teacher.*

Rex was the only adventurer I knew who experimented in such weird ways, and came up with plans that no sane person would ever dream of. His weirdness was the core of what made him such a great hero, and my role model.

“I guess with the ring even the final trial is just a matter of being patient,” I said happily.

Sure, the narrow path and arrow traps were annoying, but annoying was all they were. So long as that knight couldn’t touch me I’d be able to slowly but surely inch toward the end.

“Unfortunately not,” Rex replied with a shake of his head. “The Barrier Ring won’t help you for the final trial.”

“Wh-Why not?”

“You’ll see if you use Analyze on that statue, but the knight in the final trial is different from all the others. He has 200 Strength, and his weapons have decent Attack as well. If he hits you, your barrier’s toast.”

“Then...what are you supposed to do?”

Rex gave me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. Why do you think I went out of my way to show off all those skills in the first trial?”

“Ah...”

Indeed, if Rex had been able to clear the first two trials with the Barrier Ring, there hadn’t been any need for him to use a bunch of flashy skills on the first one.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Radd. If you blink for even a second you’ll miss all the action,” Rex said, and strode over to the door that housed the final trial. He raised his jewel, and the massive door opened with a loud groan, revealing the Dragon’s Path. “Hmm, this should be the right spot.”

Rex shuffled back and forth a little bit, then looked up at the narrow maze that spanned the chasm. “I’m not a fan of navigating narrow roads like this so I’m going to be taking a bit of a shortcut.”

Rex pulled a Decoy Gun out of his Inventory and grabbed it with his left hand. He then pointed it toward the pedestal at the end of the Dragon’s Path and pulled the trigger.

Is he planning on baiting the knight with a decoy? But...

Before I could think any harder about it a decoy appeared right in front of the pedestal and Rex sprung into action.

“Crimson Phoenix Kick!” He leapt forward, jumping into the air.

“Huh?”

I had no idea what he was planning. I'd seen that skill once before, so I knew what it did now. After freezing in midair for a bit he'd start hurtling down with a flaming leg.

"Re—"

I didn't even have a chance to finish saying his name before the skill sent him accelerating downwards.

Wait, don't tell me... Is he planning on doing a pinpoint landing? But

The angle of his descent was taking him straight to a section of the Dragon's Path. It made logical sense to jump from point to point to skip the annoying winding nature of the road. But it was hard enough to keep your balance while walking. There was no way anyone could perfectly aim a jump from that height to land at just the right spot. And even if they could, regaining your balance after that would be nigh impossible.

"No way!"

And yet, Rex did indeed manage to land on that one pinpoint location. *Was that just a coincidence? No, wait! He was measuring distances at the start with all that shuffling around!*

It was then that I finally realized what Rex had meant about skills doing the exact same thing each time being a potential benefit. As long as you measured out how far a movement skill could take you and calculated the right starting point, you'd always safely land on even the narrowest path.

But landing with such force means it's going to be hard to keep your balance...

Naturally though, Rex had taken that into account as well.

"Triple Whirlwind Kick!"

The moment Rex touched down he activated another skill to propel him into the air. If you immediately started another skill it didn't matter if you were losing your balance, the skill would move your body for you. A second later there was a loud thud as the stone statue dropped onto the lone platform in the middle of the path.

Oh, I get it now!

The reason Rex had thrown out that decoy wasn't to lure out the knight's attacks, but rather to lure the knight itself out. By putting that decoy down he'd fulfilled the conditions to summon the knight onto the central platform. And the reason for that was because the only time the knight was vulnerable was the moment that he landed. His skills would take him the same distance every time he used them, so he'd managed to calculate a trajectory that brought him to the knight right as the knight dropped down, allowing him to make short work of the final trial's biggest obstacle.

Holy shit, you're amazing, Master Rex.

As Rex landed on the central platform he unleashed yet another skill. “Shining Palm Thrust!”

He thrust his palm out toward the knight, and there was a boom and a flash of light. These knights all had such high defenses that defeating them through normal means was nigh-impossible. However, this room had a bottomless pit in it. No amount of defense could protect you from that, or so I assumed anyway. The shock wave slammed into the knight’s defenseless back, causing it to pitch forward.

“Wha—?!”

But to my utmost surprise, the same palm thrust that had sent the first trial’s knight flying was not enough to send this knight into the abyss. At the very edge of the platform, the knight managed to ground itself with a powerful stomp, and keep itself from careening into the pit. As the boss of this set of challenges, it refused to go down easily. However, it was horribly off-balance, and a single push would be enough to tilt it over the edge.

“You can do it, Master!”

Before I knew it, I’d forgotten all of my previous inhibitions about calling him master aloud, and was cheering him on. My own feelings of inadequacy were gone in this instant; I just wanted Rex to succeed. I wanted him to once again show me something spectacular that no one else ever had or ever would see. But as I watched on, something tragic happened. The recoil of the palm thrust put Rex off-balance as well, and he was teetering at the edge of the platform himself.

“Uhh...”

After a desperate attempt to right himself, Rex’s body pitched backward and he fell into an abyss that devoured even the greatest of heroes.

“Uwaaah!”

Recilia and I watched as he was swallowed up by the darkness, his arms and legs flailing wildly.

“I shouldn’t have tried to show off with that last skill,” Rex said with a smile, seemingly unfazed by the fact that he’d failed the trial at the very last moment. “Since the knight leans forward after landing it’s taking up more space than usual. I didn’t have as much of a foothold as I expected. I should have known it was a bad idea to go off-script for something as precise as this.”

He was sitting on the floor of the central room, where he’d been teleported to after falling. It pissed me off how nonchalant he was about the whole thing.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” I asked, and Rex gave me a surprised

look. His confusion only pissed me off even more. “You had the skill to beat that trial! By all rights you should have won! Doesn’t it piss you off that you lost because of something as dumb as losing your balance?!”

Rex opened his mouth to say something, but after a few seconds he shook his head and swallowed whatever he’d thought to say. “I mean, I would like to do it over if I could,” he said instead.

“Then—”

He shook his head again and added, “But unfortunately I have a Guild meeting I need to go to, so I don’t have the time.”

“But...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say he should skip the Guild meeting to see this through. Unlike me, he was one of the central figures of the Guild. If he could spread the things he knew to all adventurers around the world that would change everything. And that was far more important than his achievements as an individual adventurer. I understood that, but even so, I didn’t want to let things end like this.

“Anyway, I’m heading back now, but what are you two going to do?”

“I’ll come with you. I have no need to class change into Treasure Hunter,” Recilia said immediately.

Rex turned to me.

“I...”

This trial wasn’t time gated so I could come back tomorrow or the day after if I felt like it. There was absolutely no reason to be stubborn and stick around. But...

“Why not stick around for a bit longer?” Rex suggested.

“Huh?”

Rex gave me a gentle smile, his expression making it clear that he’d seen through my thoughts. “If you feel like you have to beat this trial before moving on then keep at it. Plus, it’d make me happy if you manage to clear the final trial in my stead. You’ll accomplish something even I couldn’t.”

“Accomplish something even you couldn’t...”

I hadn’t even thought of it that way. I clenched my fists, my determination renewed. The moment Rex had suggested staying here, I’d already made my decision.

“Guess I know what you’re doing,” Rex said, once again reading my thoughts.

Honestly that didn’t even bother me. Rex gave me an approving look, and I smiled back at him.

As he and Recilia made their way to the exit, he turned over his shoulder and said, “Make sure you take breaks in between attempts, or you’ll tire yourself out. Oh, and one last thing...”

“Gods damn it!”

I’d lost count of how many times I’d failed. I glared up at the temple’s ceiling, having just been teleported back there after falling again.

“Why?! Why can’t I escape that asshole?!”

After watching Rex’s attempt I’d started using my own Barrier Ring for the first two trials, trivializing them. But the final trial was still stumping me. I’d tried it dozens of times now, but I just couldn’t manage to shake off the knight for long enough to reach the end.

“This is way too hard.”

The path was too small to attempt any kind of dodges, and in fact too narrow to even launch a counterattack from. And while the final knight’s attack patterns weren’t too different from the other knights, it was much more skilled and attacked much faster.

“There’s no way I can...” I gritted my teeth and stopped myself before finishing that sentence. If I said it aloud, I would truly be giving up.

Did Master know I’d end up stuck like this from the start?

I thought back to the last bit of advice Rex had given me before leaving. “If you feel like you’re at wits end, think on these words: What purpose does this trial serve?”

Back then, I hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be to conquer a trial that had managed to best even Rex, but he’d known I would struggle. At the time, I hadn’t really given his words much thought, but they ran through my mind now.

“What do you mean ‘what purpose does this trial serve’?”

I was only here because Rex had told me to come. I guess in terms of concrete goals the purpose was to unlock the Treasure Hunter class.

“Hmmm...” That didn’t seem like the right answer though.

Maybe I need to look at it from a more basic perspective?

I put the motivations of other people and concrete goals out of my mind for now and focused solely on what I had come here for. Upon doing so, the answer came to me naturally.

“I came here to get stronger.”

They were my own words, but they came as a shock to me. I jolted upright.

Man, how could I have forgotten something so important?!

I’d been awed by Rex and Recilia’s strength, and lost faith in my own abilities. Which was exactly why I’d come here to get stronger. But looking back, what had I actually done? For the first trial, I’d focused on reaching the goal, and avoided fighting the knight head-on. For the second, I even gave up on coming up with clever solutions

and had relied on luck to give me a pattern I could beat. And now I was taking the easy way out by straight-up copying Rex's strategy. I'd only failed a few dozen times and I was already grumbling about how impossible the challenge was.

"I'm doing this all wrong!"

I'm not some weak-willed bastard who just wants to take the easy way out in life!

It was at that moment that I realized the reason I'd been so mad at Rex for giving up on the trial was because I'd wanted him to be my perfect role model, the hero that never gave up and overcame all obstacles in his path.

"God, I'm pathetic. I expected that out of him when I already wasn't trying to live up to that ideal."

I wasn't trying to become someone who looked up to heroes, I was trying to become a hero myself! I got to my feet and slapped my cheeks. The stinging pain helped me focus.

"I'm not done yet! Hell, I'm just getting started!"

Moping didn't solve anything. If I wanted to make progress, then I had to keep on trying. Rex had already shown me what I needed to do to win, I just had to put it into action.

You must have predicted this from the start, huh, Master Rex?

Feeling fired up, I once again got a new jewel and headed to the first trial. This time, I had my sword and shield properly equipped.

One, two, three... One, two, three...

Keeping the rhythm in my head, I danced with the stone statue in front of me. It was a deadly dance of halberd, sword, and shield, but it was undoubtedly a dance.

I've finally got it!

I'd taken off my Barrier Ring, and had given up on trying to run past the knights. As a result, I'd failed the first trial hundreds of times over. With the ring the first two trials had been a piece of cake, but now they were a real challenge. My countless failures had left me feeling like a pathetic loser. I'd lost track of the number of times I'd cursed my own weakness. But through it all, I'd refused to give up. And now, I was standing here going toe to toe with this knight using just my own strength. This was the proper way to beat the trial, which Rex had shown me at the very beginning.

I understood now what the purpose of this trial was, and why Rex had brought me here. The first two trials are practice trials that teach you how to handle the final trial! The final knight had been too strong for me to fight head-on. But after being knocked into the pit over and over by him I'd noticed something. True, that final knight was strong,

but he was strong in a way that was ultimately just an extension of the previous knights. Originally I'd thought it was unfair that there was such a huge difficulty spike with the final knight. But now I realized there was no difficulty spike. I'd just thought it was one because I'd neglected to properly train during the first two trials.

Of course, that final knight was strong, but it wasn't unbeatable. I thought back to Rex's one attempt. Had he not tried to show off with those flashy moves and gone through the trial normally, he would have had to face off against that knight. How would he have fought then? Perhaps there was no point in thinking about this hypothetical, but it gave me some valuable insight. There was no way Rex would have lost to that knight. But how would he have won?

Thinking back on it now, when Rex had dueled the first trial knight, he'd stayed put most of the time. The only time he'd shuffled forward was when he'd knocked the knight back, and he'd only moved forward enough to close the gap between them again. In other words, he'd only moved forward in a straight line, and never changed the relative position of his legs. The plaque beneath the door to the final trial read "Show me your courage," but I hadn't truly understood what that meant until now. The final trial wasn't about trying to escape from the knight, it was about beating it! Upon realizing that I'd started facing the first trial the proper way.

I'd resolved not to rely on luck or take advantage of flukes. Learning how to fight the knight was more important than simply getting through the trial. Oddly enough, once I decided that for myself, fighting the knight got a lot easier. At first I'd despaired at ever being able to learn its moves, but I was getting better and better with each attempt. The most important thing was not limiting yourself. You had to keep on connecting each move to the next one. It didn't matter how ungainly or uncool it looked, you had to keep on fighting using every tool at your disposal.

No outside light reached this temple, so I'd completely lost track of time. I had no clue if it was light or dark out. I'd taken Rex's advice to heart though and was taking frequent breaks between attempts. I'd even stopped for a meal when I'd gotten hungry. But when I wasn't resting or eating I was constantly fighting the knight. And after however many hours, I was finally starting to land hits on it. Of course, I was nowhere near Rex's level. Keeping up with one knight already took everything I had; I couldn't even imagine dueling two knights at once like he had. I was using Arts solely to offset the knight's attacks so oftentimes I didn't even care that they were weak Arts or that I looked extremely uncool using some of the more basic ones at strange angles. On top of that the only knockback Arts I knew were Wave Thrust, and another one I'd barely managed to learn by

watching Rex's movements. I'd never spent any time as the Martial Artist class so I couldn't even use Shining Palm Thrust. But even so, I'd finally worked my way up to the starting line.

"Wave Thrust!" I knocked the knight in front of me back out of the path, causing it to freeze up. I nodded in satisfaction and said, "Let's go."

Now it's time to try the final trial for real, and get my revenge on that knight!

After what seemed like an eternity, the moment of truth had finally come. I'd been focusing solely on my opponent—the large knight who was the final obstacle in this trial—for so long that I'd lost all track of time. I continued desperately throwing out Arts one after another, barely keeping my balance on the narrow Dragon's Path.

"V-Sla— Lightning— Ngh!"

I couldn't even afford to finish one Art before I was forced to transition into another. If I let an Art go to completion I wouldn't be able to block the next attack, or the attack after that. I had to cut each Art short and move to the next one just to keep up with the knight's speed.

"I'm not done yet! Tri— Flash—"

My nerves were frayed, and I knew if this went on for much longer my concentration would slip. Even a moment's carelessness would mean instant defeat, but so far at least I'd managed to slowly but surely push the knight back. And now, the critical moment had arrived.

Here it comes!

The knight's spear began to glow an ominous red, indicating that a big attack was coming. These bigger attacks couldn't be countered with an Art. You had to break the opponent's stance before he could start his attack, or dodge it somehow. Of course on this narrow path there was absolutely no room to dodge.

"Uwooooooooooooooh!"

Despite the precarious footing I stepped forward with my right foot. If I messed up I'd fall, but if I didn't take this risk the knight would knock me off regardless. At least this way I had a shot at victory!

"Wave Thrust!"

An instant before the knight unleashed his attack, the tip of my sword stabbed into its breastplate. The strike knocked the knight off-balance, and he fell into the bottomless pit. In seconds, the abyss had swallowed him up, and he vanished from sight.



I stood, stunned, in the now silent room. After a few seconds though, I returned to my senses.

It's not over yet. I still haven't reached the goal!

I may have eliminated the most dangerous obstacle in my path, but who knew what other deadly traps awaited me on the last stretch. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down, then carefully started inching my way down the Dragon's Path. To my surprise though, I was able to reach the pedestal without any further interference.

"H-Ha ha ha... I did it!"

With a trembling hand, I unclipped the jewel from my collar. I felt far more accomplished then when I'd cleared the first and second trials for the first time. In fact, I was literally moved to tears. With the jewel firmly held in my right hand I spoke to the nameless hero who'd created this trial.

"I don't know anything about you. But I promise to carry on your will. So rest peacefully."

Reverently, I held the jewel up to the pedestal, thinking back to the many attempts it had taken to finally get here. Slowly, the jewel absorbed the light of the pedestal.

"Huh?"

But after that, nothing happened. I waited for a full minute, but there was no other change.

"What's going on?"

I showed my courage, defeated the knight, made it across the Dragon's Path, and presented the completed jewel to the pedestal. That's everything I'm supposed to do, right?

However, even waving the jewel around did nothing. I tried pressing it against the relief carved into the wall behind the pedestal and still nothing happened.

But why? This doesn't make any sense. For the last two trials all I'd had to do was hold the jewel up to the pedestal... Wait, hang on.

A shiver ran down my spine as I noticed something terrible. I had just assumed this pedestal was like the others because it lay at the end of a long path, but looking closely I realized the construction of this room and the pedestal were completely different. For one thing this was a much bigger room with more ostentatious decorations. Plus this pedestal was far plainer, and made of completely different materials than the other two. There were absolutely no similarities between this one and the others. And yet, this pedestal looked familiar somehow. My thoughts started to get muddled, but before I could puzzle this mystery out, I heard a resounding thud behind me.

"Huh?"

My mind went blank. I knew I had to turn around and face the

threat that had appeared behind me, but my body wouldn't move.

"Why...?"

I couldn't understand. What had I done wrong? What was the mistake I'd made? Seeking answers, I finally forced myself to turn around. I saw a huge knight looking like he'd just thrown something.

"Oh..."

A second later, a giant stone spear blotted out my vision.

When we'd almost reached Freelea I turned around and looked off into the distance.

Radd should be reaching the final pedestal right around now.

In retrospect, I probably should have given him some more concrete advice. I was regretting being vague now. At first I'd intended on being more explicit, but every time I'd thought of helping Radd out—

My terrifying little sister had gotten in the way, spouting something like, "Please don't get distracted during our training, brother." Granted, Recilia was a pupil worth teaching, so it didn't hurt to give some more of my time to her. Besides, Radd was the kind of person who'd get stronger on his own, even without my advice. If anything, I needed to keep working hard or he'd surpass me before long.

"I am somewhat surprised, though," Recilia muttered, snapping me out of my musings.

"About what?"

"I didn't think you would leave without clearing the trial.

Knowing you I thought you'd go for a second attempt and then try and make it back to Freelea on time by chaining as many fast movement Arts as you could."

Just what kind of person do you think I am? I mean you're right, but still...

Recilia had made one big misunderstanding though.

"There was no need for that. Umm..."

I looked around and spotted a nearby hill where a bunch of Mana Flowers were growing. They were a core alchemy component, so I'd be able to sell them for a pretty penny. Plus, a visual demonstration would work better than an explanation.

"I'm going to make a small detour," I said, and started running over to the Mana Flower hill. Until now, I'd had to use Thief's Eye to look for material gathering locations, but there was no need for that anymore.

Once I'd reached the center of the flower field I held out my left hand and said, "Gather!" The flowers transformed into balls of white

light and were sucked into my left hand.

“What are you...?”

Recilia trailed off in surprise, watching as I harvested from every gathering point on the hill at once, collecting all of the harvestable flowers in the span of a few seconds.

Incidentally, because this world was based off of a fantasy setting, even if I overharvested natural resources, they would magically regrow in a few days.

“Wh-What was that?”

“I’m sure you’ve already figured it out. That was the effect of the Treasure Hunter skill, Master Gatherer,” I replied with a grin.

Indeed, I had already changed classes to Treasure Hunter.

“Don’t tell me...” It seemed Recilia had figured out the trick as well. “You’d already gone to the temple before showing it to us and completed the trial?!”

“Yea... Huh?”

Recilia gave me a look of disdain and I quickly explained what she’d missed.

“No, no! I only became a Treasure Hunter after undertaking the trial right before we left.”

“But you fell during the middle of the final trial, didn’t you?”

“Not quite. By the time I’d fallen, I’d already reached the endpoint of the trial, and accomplished what we’d come here to do.”

Recilia cocked her head in confusion and I added, “Do you remember what was written on the plaque in front of the door to the final trial?”

“I believe it went something like ‘I await you at the end of the Dragon’s Path. Show me your courage and offer the completed key to me.’”

“Correct. Next question—for what purpose did we go to that temple?”

“To obtain the Treasure Hunter class, right?”

Recilia narrowed her eyes at me, thinking I was making fun of her. I ignored her glare and asked my final question.

“And normally, what do you need to do to change to a new class?”

“Well, you need to find the statue of the hero that corresponds to the class you’re changing to, and if you meet the prerequisite conditions when you touch the statue your body will glow... Oh, I see now.”

She’d finally figured it out.

“The statue that appears during the final trial is the statue of the hero which you need to touch to change classes. It’s the Treasure Hunter statue, and it’s also why only that knight is dual wielding a

sword and spear instead of using a halberd like the rest,” I said with a nod.

The original Treasure Hunter had also used a sword and spear. If you knew the history of the first Treasure Hunter that would help you in figuring out the final trial’s secret.

“Though even if you don’t know that, if you use Analyze on the statue, you’ll see the hero’s name so you should be able to figure it out. That’s also why the final statue doesn’t have a Strength stat of 1.”

Every class change statue had the stats that corresponded to the minimum stats you needed to become that class. The other trial statues all had 1 Attack and 999 Defense, but the final knight statue had a pretty normal stat spread. Once you noticed that solving the final riddle was easy.

“So when the plaque said ‘Show me your courage and offer the completed key to me’ what it really meant was...”

“Yep. You’re supposed to muster your courage and approach the Treasure Hunter statue. If you touch it with the hand that’s holding the completed jewel, you’ll change classes.”

The reason I’d used Shining Palm Thrust at the end there hadn’t been to knock the knight into the pit. It was just the fastest way to get the hand that was holding the jewel to touch the statue. Admittedly I hadn’t thought about what would happen after I’d touched the statue which was why I’d fallen off right after completing the trial.

Recilia furrowed her brow thoughtfully. “But then, what’s the purpose of the pedestal in the far room? The first part of the plaque says ‘I await you at the end of the Dragon’s Path.’ Is that pedestal not the end?”

That was the trial’s final trick. But if you properly observed the pedestal you’d be able to see through that as well.

“That pedestal has a completely different design than the two that serve as the end goal for the first two trials. However, the other trials do still contain that type of pedestal.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There’s dozens of them, in fact. The pedestal at the end of the final trial is the same as all the pedestals that the knights lining either side of the path in the first two trials are standing on.”

I had no way of confirming it, but I highly suspected that while the door to the final trial was closed, the Treasure Hunter statue was waiting patiently on that pedestal for the next challenger. In other words, it was indeed waiting at the end of the Dragon’s Path. When I thought about how it had to quickly teleport up to the ceiling every time someone cleared the second trial the statue seemed kinda cute honestly.

“There’s a few other minor hints here and there, but that’s the gist

of it.”

Recilia let out a long sigh. “What a bully...” she muttered, frowning.

“I mean, he *was* known as a legendary treasure hunter, after all. That’s about what you’d expect from someone like that.”

Recilia shook her head. “It’s true that the trial is mean-spirited as well, but I was referring to you, brother. Shouldn’t you have explained all of that to Radd?”

“I did consider it.”

When Radd had asked me why I wasn’t angrier about failing the trial, I’d considered coming clean and just letting him know that I had actually cleared the trial. But in the end, I’d kept my mouth shut.

“I did give him a few hints, and I think it’ll be better for him in the long run to figure it out himself. Besides...”

“Is there another reason?” Recilia asked, and I gave her an angelic smile.

“It took me two whole hours to figure out the secret of that trial. It’d piss me off if Radd managed to clear it super quickly!”

I could be honest about my feelings to Recilia.

Incidentally, it was twelve hours later that Radd barged into my room, fuming, and hurled a barrage of insults at me for not telling him the truth.

Chapter 7: The Strongest In the World

There was only a week left now until the tournament to decide the world's strongest fighter. Fortunately, Radd and the others had grown immensely over the past few weeks. Radd especially was far stronger than he had been at the start of the month. Though he'd been sulking after finally clearing the Treasure Hunter temple's trials, his experiences there had helped hone his skills, and more importantly, his intuition. Until now he'd had passion, but he'd mostly just done whatever I'd told him without thinking too much about it. Now he carefully analyzed the purpose behind each training exercise, and was also trying to absorb skills and techniques that I wasn't explicitly teaching him.

It's about time I started getting them properly prepared for the tournament. The biggest thing we needed to change was equipment. I'd given everyone equipment that increased growth rates upon leveling and stat gains from training, but for the tournament everyone would need equipment that actually had beneficial combat abilities and raised their stats. However, it would take some time to get used to using new equipment, so I wanted to give everyone their stuff early and let them break their new equipment in.

Plus, I haven't unveiled all the loot we got from raiding the Twelve Ruins of Darkness yet!

There were all these cool unique items we'd grabbed from the dungeons, and it would be a waste not to show them off to everyone.

Humming to myself, I made my way over to the Adventurers' Guild's training grounds.

"Oh, it's just you two? Where are Prana and Mana?"

Radd was single-mindedly swinging his sword at the training dummy while Nyuuk was practicing his incantations, but the two girls were nowhere to be seen.

Nyuuk gave me a wry smile and said, "Prana took Mana to go register for the tournament."

"I see..."

I'd thought I'd take everyone to register together after showing them their new equipment, but it seemed the two girls wanted to register as soon as possible.

"You two didn't go?" I asked.

Nyuuk exchanged glances with Radd, then awkwardly said, "Umm...we actually lined up at dawn and registered the moment the receptionist's counter opened."

"Ahhh..."

It seemed the two boys had been even more excited for the tournament. It sounded like Prana had found out after the boys had already registered without her, which was why she'd dragged Mana to go with her immediately after.

"You guys are really pumped for this tournament, huh?"

Blushing with embarrassment, Radd nevertheless shouted, "O-Of course we are! This is the perfect chance to see how much stronger we've gotten as adventurers!" He looked down at his armor made of springs and added in a quieter voice, "Also...we won't level up during the tournament, so we won't have to wear this lame armor."

I guess the lameness of their armor was weighing on them after all...

"In that case, you'll be glad to know you'll get to use the much cooler equipment we got from our previous dungeon excursion."

The tournament rules were quite simple, and they stayed the same year after year. If your HP dropped below half you lost, you could use whatever equipment you wanted, and you were allowed to freely use consumables and anything else in your Inventory. The strength of your equipment and items mattered as much as your strength as an individual. And as Radd had mentioned, you got no experience from fights in the tournament, so there was no need to wear growth-boosting equipment. For the first time Radd and the others would be able to wear equipment that maximized their abilities.

"You're going to get the best glow-up of all, Nyuuk."

"I am?" Nyuuk looked up at me in surprise.

"The items we got from the Elder Lich are meant for mages. They're a bit difficult to use, but if you master them you'll become much stronger."

I pulled out the two items the Elder Lich had dropped, the Lunatic Circlet and the Fell Crimson Rod.

"Umm, what effects do those two items have exactly?"

Nyuuk seemed oddly reticent, and I wrote down the descriptions for both items into my notebook and handed him the page.

【Lunatic Circlet】:

A circlet crafted by a crazed mage. It is the culmination of all of his knowledge and skill, and the forbidden power circulating within it showers its owner with endless glory and ruinous destruction at the same time. Those who wear this circlet will be granted immeasurable magical power, but mortals

will eventually have their minds corrupted. Equipping it forces the Insane status effect on the user. The Insane status effect doubles your magical power, but reduces your magical defense to zero.

Furthermore, when casting a spell there is a 50% chance your mana goes berserk, and you take damage equal to the spell's power. This status effect cannot be cured, and remains perpetually as long as the circlet is equipped.

"This circlet is totally worthless!" Radd exclaimed as he read the description together with Nyuuk.

"I did say these items would be a bit difficult to use."

With the Magic Attack doubling effect of the circlet, any Mage who used this was at risk of killing themselves with any spell they cast. That being said, double the magic power was enormous. If you learned how to use this circlet properly, your damage potential went through the roof.

"Also, this circlet has one more hidden effect," I explained.

"What's that?" Radd asked, curious.

"Just like the Brave Sword I gave you, this lets you class change into a special class."

Radd's current class, Brave Leo, was one you could only unlock by switching to the basic Young Leo class with the Brave Sword equipped, assuming you had hit the stat requirements to use the Brave Sword without any penalties. The Lunatic Circlet worked similarly. If you swapped to Young Leo with the Lunatic Circlet equipped, you class changed to Lunatic Leo.

"Furthermore, unlike the Brave Sword, the Lunatic Circlet has no stat requirements to equip. Also, it's offensive growth boosts are higher than Brave Leo's. In fact, they're the highest out of any class. If all you want is firepower, this is probably the strongest class."

"It is?! Err, I mean I guess that's cool."

Radd couldn't resist the allure of the word "strongest." I smiled at him, then flipped through my notebook.

First, I showed everyone what Brave Leo's growth boosts looked like.

Strength: +3

Vitality: +3

Intelligence: +0

Mind: +3

Agility: +3

Focus: +3

Total: 15

Suffice to say, Brave Leo was a very balanced class that raised all growths except Intelligence by 3. Lunatic Leo, however, was the polar opposite of Brave Leo.

“Here, take a look.”

I found the page that had Lunatic Leo’s growths on it and showed Radd.

Strength: +7

Vitality: +0

Intelligence: +7

Mind: +0

Agility: +0

Focus: +0

Total: 14

“That’s way too unbalanced!” Radd shouted, and I snickered. That was exactly the reaction I’d expected.

“Well, even putting aside the fact that it has zero growths for most things, the fact that it gives huge boosts to Strength and Intelligence makes it a rather difficult class to work with. Few builds need a high amount of both.”

“Old man...” Radd gave me an exasperated look, and I saw that even Nyuuk and Recilia were giving me cold stares.

“H-Hold on! I admit this circlet’s a bit tricky but the rod is just plain good!”

In an attempt to clear my good name, I hurriedly pulled out the other item the Elder Lich had dropped. The Fell Crimson Rod, which had a very bombastic name, also had a very ostentatious red jewel at its tip, which gleamed in the noon light.

“This is basically just a flat upgrade to the Red Flare Rod you’ve been using until now, Nyuuk.”

“Really?!” Nyuuk asked, excited, and I nodded in relief.

“Just like the Red Flare Rod, it has a powerful spell built into it. Also just like the Red Flare Rod, it has a higher base damage than it does a variable modifier. It’s the kind of weapon that’s suited to a lower-level Mage than one who’s maxed out their Intelligence stat. The sooner you get it the more value you can squeeze out of it.”

The Fell Flare Rod *did* have one big difference compared to the Red Flare Rod though.

“This thing’s Magic Attack is insanely high. As far as I know, it has the highest base magic damage of any weapon in this world. The spell carved into the rod takes a long time to cast and costs a ton of MP, but

it does insane damage. Incidentally, it's also worth a shit ton of money."

The Red Flare Rod I'd gotten for Nyuuk to help him beat the Rainbow Lava Caverns had cost 50,000,000 wen. Nyuuk had been really scared about using it because he was worried about breaking such an expensive weapon, but this thing was worth way more.

"It's a unique item, so it's not like you'd be able to buy it anywhere, but if you were to sell it you'd get..."

"H-How much?" Nyuuk asked timidly, and I grinned.

"1,000,000,000 wen."

Nyuuk gulped. Despite how strong he'd gotten, he still clearly had the mindset of a common adventurer, which made teasing him really fun.

"Oh, and here's the item description."

I flipped to a different page of my notebook, then showed him the Fell Crimson Rod's description.

【Fell Crimson Rod】 :

A one of a kind staff made from blasphemous methods using the greatest materials known to man. The jewel at the tip has the souls of dozens of mages trapped inside of it, and it can unleash a blaze that matches the destructive force of dragon breath.

The jewel is the strongest magic catalyst in the world, and the staff itself is relatively easy to use. Even a beginner Mage will transform into an unstoppable powerhouse with this staff. But take heed—those who shirk their training and rely on easy sources of power will never grasp a truly bright future.

"Is it just me, or is the warning at the end there kind of ominous?" Radd asked.

Nyuuk was so entranced by the rod that he hadn't even noticed the last sentence.

"W-Well, this rod does have one flaw," I said awkwardly.

"What's that?"

"Equipping it lowers your Intelligence growth."

"So this item's garbage too!" Radd shouted.

As always, if something sounded too good to be true, it probably was. Incidentally the spell baked into the rod had a big drawback to it as well. It cost 200 MP, which meant even Nyuuk couldn't get more than one shot off with it.

“Th-That being said, it’s not as if you’re going to level during the tournament, so growths don’t matter. It gives a pretty solid boost to stats so you could use it just for the tournament...”

I tried to push the Fell Crimson Rod onto Nyuuk, but he shook his head.

“N-No thanks, I think I’ll pass.” He said, completely turned off by the weapon. “Besides, I want to see how strong I am in a practical sense during this tournament. There’s no point in using specialized equipment that I won’t actually be using when fighting monsters, so...”

Nyuuk trailed off but I’d gotten the point. He wasn’t interested in quirky items.

Radd let out a long sigh and said, “You know old man, I can never tell if you’re a genius or an idiot.”

Hey, there’s no need to be so rude!

Before I could say anything to argue, Radd added, “But...” His lips curled up into a grin. “Knowing you, I bet you’d be able to find some crazy way to maximize the power of those two weapons. That’s just how you are, Rex.”

“Oh uh...thanks.” I hadn’t expected him to praise me.

Radd’s expression turned serious again, and he asked, “Hey old man, are you really not going to participate in the tournament?”

“Huh?”

I’d told them all a while ago that I wouldn’t be entering the tournament. They’d found my decision strange, but no one had voiced any objections. I’d figured they’d all accepted my choice, but it seemed not.

“Maybe I’m getting too full of myself, but I think I’ve gotten a lot stronger. Which is why I want to test myself and see how far I can get in the tournament to decide the world’s strongest,” Radd said, looking up at me with determination in his eyes. “But you know, you’re the person I want to fight for real the most! You’re the one I want to show how much I’ve grown!”

“If you want to spar, I’ll take you on any time.” Unable to bear the weight of his gaze, I awkwardly turned away.

“That’s not the same thing and you know it!”

In an attempt to shake Radd off I glanced over at the door. “Come to think of it, Prana and Mana sure are taking a while. I’ll go check up on them.”

“Wait, old man!”

Recilia moved to follow me, and I held out a hand to stop her. “It’s fine, I’ll be back soon. Just keep on training until then.”

With that, I fled the training grounds.

Once I left the Guild and was alone I angrily muttered to myself, “Real mature of you, Rex.”

I knew I was being pathetic. But I couldn’t stand staying with Radd and the others for a second longer. I let out a long sigh as I thought back to the unbridled respect Radd had in his eyes when he’d looked up at me. If I was being honest, it made me happy that he thought so highly of me. At the same time though, his expectations weighed heavily on me. The reason I wasn’t entering the tournament wasn’t because I had no interest in it. Indeed, one of the protagonist’s main goals in the mid-game was winning the tournament, and victory brought with it a very worthwhile reward.

However, there was a very simple reason I wasn’t entering: I knew I couldn’t win. Rex might be considered the strongest character of *BB*’s early game, but that was only in comparison to all of the party members you could recruit during that time. If you included event characters and characters you couldn’t recruit then there were plenty of people stronger than Rex. Furthermore, they had actually good growths so they kept on getting stronger while Rex languished. Radd wanted to test his strength by challenging me, but he’d already surpassed me when it came to stats.

Besides, even if I beat Radd and won the tournament, there’s still the impossible foe waiting for me at the end.

The champion of the coliseum was truly the strongest character in the world, not a fake like me. A shiver ran down my spine as I thought back to the duel that awaited the victor of the tournament. That guy’s in a completely different dimension.

I can’t beat him no matter what I do.

No matter how much game knowledge I had, no matter what tricks I came up with, no matter how much luck favored me, I couldn’t even secure a 1% chance of victory. Every time I envisioned the back of the strongest warrior, I felt a fresh wave of terror. In-game I’d lost to him so many times that I couldn’t even muster up the courage to try and face him anymore.

There’s no way I can tell Radd the truth—that the master he looks up to so much is an uncool coward.

Radd and the others would keep growing, and eventually they’d surpass me in all ways, not just stats. But until that day came, I wanted them to see me as a strong and cool adventurer. I didn’t want to lose a fight in front of them. It was vain of me, I knew, but that’s just who I was.

Anyway, I should look for Prana and Mana. After I bring them back I can hopefully give some noncommittal answer to get Radd off my back.

I was once again reminded of how terrible my growth rates were, and with a heavy heart and heavy steps I made my way to the coliseum. Before long, it came into view.

“Get away from me!” I heard a familiar elven girl’s voice snarl from nearby.

Well, that saves me the trouble of looking for them.

I turned a corner and saw Prana glaring at someone, with Mana cowering behind Prana’s back. I’d expected some kind of trouble judging by Prana’s tone of voice, and I wasn’t mistaken.

Sheesh. What kind of moron is picking a fight with Prana?

Both of her and Mana were beautiful young women so maybe someone was trying to hit on them? I didn’t know who was bothering them, but thrashing them would help relieve some of my stress.

I strode closer and the person Prana was glaring at came into view. When I saw who it was, my breath caught in my throat. “Oh...”

The rest of my words were swallowed up by shock. I reflexively took a step backwards.

“Rex!” Mana shouted, spotting me.

Yet my legs refused to move. The burly man standing before Prana slowly turned to face me.

Of course... In an attempt to distract myself from my trembling hands and frozen legs I thought, The tournament’s about to start. I should have predicted that a meeting like this might happen.

The burly man’s gaze pierced right through me, and still I couldn’t bring myself to move. However I finally managed to open my dry lips and say, “Nirva, the Invincible Blademaster.”

Reflexively, I cast Analyze, and the numbers that appeared before my eyes sent me spiraling even deeper into despair.

【Nirva】

LV: 70

HP: 2120

MP: 385

Strength: 975 (SS)

Vitality: 975 (SS)

Intelligence: 300 (B)

Mind: 450 (A-)

Agility: 825 (S+)

Focus: 525 (A+)

The world’s strongest warrior was standing in front of me.

Among the Braves and Blades community there were NPCs known

as the OP four because of how insanely powerful they were. The first was the Prince of Light, Ain, who was also the face of *Braves and Blades* and one of its most popular characters. He was the most ludicrous of all the characters in the game. Not only did he have some of the highest stats out of all of *BB*'s cast, he also had a ridiculously strong unique class, there were plenty of events that starred him, and he was the hottie prince of a big name kingdom. He was perfect in every way. His stat spread was like the better version of Rex's, where he had balanced stats across the board, but they were all actually high.

The second of the OP four was one of the most dangerous enemies the player faced in the latter half of the game and the leader of the Cult of Everlasting Darkness, the Prince of Darkness. The Cult of Everlasting Darkness got stronger the better the players were doing, which made them the most annoying antagonists to deal with. This did mean the Prince of Darkness himself wasn't always super strong, but when you were doing well he was utterly broken. When I ran into him on my third playthrough he nearly wiped my party with a single AoE attack, which was what caused me to give up on doing a true end run.

The third member of the OP four was the leader of the gnome nation, Haat the White Queen. She did have pretty high stats and powerful skills, but she didn't start out as broken as the first two. However, she was the chosen avatar of the water god, and if you went through her divine awakening event her stats went up considerably and she became one of the strongest people in the world. Her Mind especially was super high, making her easily the best healer in the game.

The three of them were all ridiculously strong precisely because you could never get them to join your party, and each of them were unmatched in their particular niche. However, none of them would be able to beat the final member of the OP four in a one-on-one duel. After all, he was the strongest when it came to a simple fight. And he was none other than the undefeated champion of the coliseum, Nirva the Invincible Blademaster.

But what was he doing here?! Despair washed over me as I stared at his stats. The numbers didn't change no matter how many times I double-checked them. I'd seen his stats dozens of times before in the game, but they were still unbelievable. In comparison, my stats were utterly pathetic.

【Rex】

LV: 52

HP: 542

MP: 281
Strength: 209 (C+)
Vitality: 204 (C+)
Intelligence: 214 (C+)
Mind: 204 (C+)
Agility: 210 (C+)
Focus: 212 (C+)

The difference was night and day. Even if I equipped all the enchanted accessories I could, it would barely shorten the gap between us. No matter what I did, there was no way I could match up to him.

Fuck! It's not fair how OP his stats are!

When looking at Nirva's stats, the first thing that jumped out to the eye was the fact that he was a whopping level 70, but his level wasn't what made him so strong. Even if Radd, who had a similar stat spread as another melee fighter, made it to level 70, he wouldn't even have half as high stats as Nirva. And compared to the average adventurer, Radd was already quite strong. His stat growths per level were higher than most other adventurers.

You see, the standard adventurer who'd managed to unlock a tier three class had an average total stat growth of +18, with a bonus +12 coming from their class. In other words, their stats increased by around +30 per level. In comparison, Radd had a base total stat growth of +22, and his class gave him a bonus of +15. There was another bonus +3 coming from his equipment, which meant he gained +40 stat points per level. Those extra 10 stat points per level made a huge difference, and they were a reflection of the immense effort Radd had put into his training. With every level, Radd gained an extra 10 stats compared to other adventurers.

However, Nirva's growths were on a completely different level. His base growths were well above Radd's +22, and even above the protagonist's +25, sitting at a whopping +26. Furthermore, he was the strongest close combat class, Blademaster. That class gave an extra bonus +24 stat points per level, and his unique equipment gave him another +4 on top of that, putting his final stat growths at a mind-boggling +54. That meant that Nirva gained an extra +14 stats over Radd per level. The most ridiculous thing of all was that Nirva had been born as a Blademaster.

Normally, you needed to meet a class's requirements to change into that class, and most higher-tier classes required decently high stats so you couldn't change into them immediately. If you chose the kid who wanted to be an adventurer backstory in the game, the protagonist started out as a Young Leo, which only gave +2 bonus

stat points per level. Radd himself had started out as a Fighter, and normally would have had to work his way up through Swordsman and then Imperial Swordsman. Unique classes like Ninja and Blademaster which gave high bonus growths tended to have extremely difficult requirements to class change into them. Not only did you need pretty high stats, you also usually needed to fulfill some special conditions.

However, characters like Nirva and Ain were special. Their classes were fixed from the start, even if they didn't initially meet the default requirements to be those classes. In other words, even when Radd had been just a Fighter and had yet to class change into Brave Leo, Nirva had still been a Blademaster and getting +54 stats per level from level 1. He'd been the strongest from the start, was the strongest now, and would continue to be the strongest forever. That was who Nirva the Invincible Blademaster was.

"Rex?" Nirva muttered, turning to face me. The weight of his gaze was so great that I felt like running even though he wasn't doing anything.

Calm down. Deep breaths. Heart pounding, I managed to calm myself down enough to bear Nirva's gaze. *This is a public street. Even if he's the strongest fighter in the world, surely he won't do anything rash.*

In the world of BB, powerful individuals could easily overwhelm large groups. A high-level adventurer could go on a rampage in a city, and the combined might of all of its guards wouldn't be able to stop them. However, there were special NPCs who were given the unique class Judge, who could use extremely powerful skills specifically against people who'd committed crimes. One of Judge's passives made them immune to damage from criminals, while a Judge's own attacks would ignore the defense of any criminal, and do increased damage based on how severe their crime was. No matter how strong you were, doing something illegal in a city like Freelea which had a few Judges in it was tantamount to suicide.

It's okay. I'll be fine.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that if Nirva really wanted to, he could cut me down in one stroke. Sensing my fear, Nirva scoffed, then turned back to Prana.

"G-Get away from me!" Prana shouted, but he ignored her warning and drew closer.

Mana turned back to me with pleading eyes. I knew my conscience would haunt me forever if I ignored her cry for help.

Tamping down on my panic, I stepped in between Nirva and Prana. "Hold up. What do you want with her?"

I couldn't tell if my voice was trembling or not. Either way, I managed to get Nirva to focus on me again.

"Move. My business is with that girl over there."

Nirva's voice was so intimidating I nearly flinched. *You can do this. You're the fearless A-rank adventurer, Rex!*

Psyching myself up, I looked Nirva in the eyes. "I'm sorry, but these two are my disciples," I said, trying my best to sound as confident as possible.

"You're pathetic," Nirva said dismissively, raising a hand to brush me aside.

"N-No he's not! Rex is..."

To my surprise, Prana spoke up in my defense. However, I held out a hand to stop her. In truth, I was pretty pissed off at Nirva. As someone who was still clinging to the vain hope that I could make myself strong, I absolutely wanted to beat this guy. Unfortunately, it was an undeniable fact that I stood zero chance against him right now. I needed to find a way to smooth things over, or I'd be toast.

"Don't make me laugh," Nirva said to me, taking advantage of Prana's silence. "What can you possibly teach anyone when you're so weak yourself?"

"What?!"

Nirva's glare pierced right through me. "If you're a swordsman of any caliber at all, then you should already have noticed how wide the gap in strength is between us."

"I..."

Loathe though I was to admit it, he was right. I knew better than anyone just how much stronger Nirva was than me. I could see people's stats as cold, hard numbers, and I'd seen what he was capable of in-game as well.

But that doesn't mean—

"A person's natural talents determine how far they can go. And I feel no talent for swordsmanship from you. Listen well." Nirva glared condescendingly down at me. "You will never be able to match me."

I felt as though I'd been punched in the face. Even though Nirva hadn't done anything physically, I still staggered backwards, and my vision grew blurry. Nirva stepped past me, treating me like nothing more than a pebble on the road. But I wasn't going to just lie down and take this.

"Wait."

I once again stepped between him and Prana.

"What do you want? I already told you I have no use for the weak."

"It's true that I'm weak right now. But that won't always be the case. I'm going to get much stronger, and I swear I'll surpass you someday."

My words didn't resonate with the Blademaster though. "Talk is cheap. But you—"

“In that case, how about I put my money where my mouth is.”

Half of me wanted to run away right now, and the other half wanted to carry through with this reckless plan. In the end, the latter half won. I took a plain glove out of my Inventory and threw it at Nirva.

“I challenge you to a Spirit Duel. Surely you’re not afraid of fighting a weakling like myself, Mr. Blademaster?”

There was no turning back now.

Nirva was completely unfazed by my challenge, though he did seem to find it amusing.

“Ha ha ha ha! A Spirit Duel, you say? Very well. However...” Nirva pointed a finger at Prana. “If I win, then you’ll hand that girl over to me.”

“What?!”

Seeing my shock, Nirva smiled sadistically at me. “What’s wrong? I thought you wanted to prove your potential to me. Or were you just bluffing when you said you could beat me?”

“I...”

My words died in my throat. I’d challenged Nirva purely to satisfy my own selfish ego. It would be wrong of me to get Prana mixed up in this.

Just as I was about to retract my challenge, Mana suddenly spoke up. “R-Rex won’t lose to the likes of you!” There was a surprising amount of strength in her voice.

“Mana...”

I turned around and saw her glaring unflinchingly at Nirva. Prana, too, didn’t look the least bit afraid.

“That’s right. I know Rex can beat you,” the elf girl said, looking at me. I could tell from her expression that she had absolute faith in me.

“Then it’s decided,” Nirva said with a satisfied nod.

All of a sudden, I realized this had been his goal from the start, but it was too late to stop him now. I no longer had the option of retracting my challenge.

“Fine. But in return, if I win you have to promise me you won’t ever lay a hand on her.”

“Very well. But are you sure that’s enough?”

For a moment, I didn’t get what Nirva was asking.

Savoring my confused look, he added, “You hope to accomplish a miracle no one else has in beating me, and yet that’s all you ask for? Is that enough for you?”

You overconfident little bastard. Gritting my teeth, I shook my head.

“Yeah. My greatest desire is to beat you. I don’t need anything else.”

“Really, now...”

If I was being honest with myself, I was actually tempted to ask for more. But I didn’t want to tarnish this duel with my base desires. I wanted a pure, simple victory over the strongest man in *BB*.

Whatever Nirva saw in my expression, it caused him to grin like a savage beast, then turn his back to me. “I’ll prepare one of the rings for our duel. Meet me in the arena in ten minutes.”

He casually walked off, not once looking back at us. It was clear he had no doubt he would win with ease.

“Rex!” Prana and Mana shouted in unison, running up to me as soon as Nirva had vanished from sight.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything...” Mana said apologetically.

I shook my head. As the one who’d proposed the duel, I was responsible for what had happened. That being said, if we went in circles apologizing to each other it would just waste the precious time I had to prepare.

“We don’t have much time. I need to make preparations before the duel.”

You see, in a Spirit Duel, both parties had their level set to 25, regardless of how high or low their actual levels were. Furthermore, their stats were set to what they would be if they’d leveled up from 0 with their innate growth rate plus the bonuses from the current class they were. That was in fact why I’d utilized the Spirit Duel to calculate people’s growths. All of this meant you could do a pseudo-respec for a Spirit Duel. Indeed, the Trial of Souls that I was planning on using for my actual respec worked under similar principles. Choosing the right class and equipment before stepping into the ring impacted your odds of victory significantly. In other words, the duel had already begun.

That being said...in the game version of *Braves and Blades*, there were only two ways for you to fight Nirva. The first was to win the tournament to decide the world’s strongest, and the second was to clear eleven of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness and enter the final one. Between the two, winning the tournament was far easier. But even that required beating some of the strongest fighters in the world, which would be a tall hurdle given my stats. Besides, even the protagonist, who did have the stats to win that tournament, struggled to even scratch Nirva.

Nirva was level 70, and had some of the best equipment in the game. He wasn’t someone you stood a chance against in the early or mid-game, and the rules of the exhibition match meant your strength

as an individual was all that mattered. The match ended once one party hit half health, you could wear any equipment you liked, but you weren't allowed to use your Inventory. That prevented you from using most fancy tricks to cheat out a victory. You could try to use status ailments and debuffs, like we had against the Elder Lich, but Nirva's armor gave him a 95% chance to resist all status ailments so that wasn't likely to work either.

Still, if you had no other options, clinging to that 5% chance had been better than accepting defeat. On forums and walk-through sites, most people recommended dual-wielding Basilisk Daggers or Cockatrice Knives so you had the chance to trigger a lucky petrification on Nirva during the duel. However, neither of those weapons had a 100% base chance to inflict petrification to begin with. In other words, you needed one of the few attacks you were able to get off before dying to proc its petrification chance, and then get through Nirva's 95% ailment resistance. The odds were staggeringly low. Also, you couldn't save during the tournament so if you were trying to win with this cheese strategy you had to reload from the start of the tournament each time you failed. No sane person would be willing to waste that much time, but Nirva was so strong that was still considered one of the best ways to beat him.

Besides, that strat won't work here anyway.

For starters, I had no petrification-inflicting weapons, but even if I did, I wasn't about to bet on a less than 5% chance. Plus, you couldn't save and reload in this world, and even if I could do such a thing, Rex didn't have the stats to consistently win the tournament. And I had to win here, or Nirva would drag Prana away...

"I can't afford to lose," I muttered to myself.

My one advantage was that I'd gotten Nirva to agree to a Spirit Duel. That would make him a lot weaker than he normally was. But even then he would be far, far stronger than me. If the fight dragged out I would be at a huge disadvantage.

My only hope is in a quick, decisive victory.

Nirva had the better growth rates, better skills, and better equipment. It was unlikely I'd be able to get a clean hit in even under normal circumstances. My best chance was beating him with one powerful attack before he got serious. I'd need to bet everything on that one attack. In which case, I knew exactly how to build Rex for this duel.

"Prana, Mana—wait at the coliseum for me. I need to stop by the temple first."

"Forgive me for the clichéd phrasing, but I'm impressed you didn't

turn tail and run,” Nirva said with a smile as he watched me approach him a short time later. I was wearing a bulky cloak that covered my entire body, hiding my weapons from sight.

“Any rules you want to add for this duel?” I asked.

“It’ll be like a regular tournament match, just as a Spirit Duel instead.”

I’d expected as much. That wasn’t an ideal ruleset for me, but I suspected Nirva wouldn’t accept his loss if I beat him using a custom ruleset. Fortunately, I’d prepared for precisely this.

“Are you ready?” I asked, and instead of answering, Nirva stepped into the ring and drew the two swords—known as the Magebane Greatswords—sheathed in a cross shape at his back.

Normally, you needed two hands to wield a greatsword, but Nirva had the Berserker class skill Superhuman Strength, which allowed him to one-hand two-handed weapons. And, of course, he also had the Ninja’s Ambidextrous skill. To top it all off, he also had the Blademaster skill, Twin Arts, which increased the damage dealt by dual-wielding Arts. Nirva was an undisputed master of the dual-wielding fighting style. However...

“Hm?” Nirva raised an eyebrow, then tossed aside the sword in his left hand. He then gripped his remaining sword with both hands.

Perfect, just as planned!

Nirva’s Magebane Greatswords were extremely powerful, but they also had very high stat requirements to wield them properly. Normally, Nirva had the stats to wield both in one hand, but thanks to the restrictions of the Spirit Duel, his level had been reduced to nearly a third of his normal. His stats were now low enough that the stat restrictions on his equipment mattered. He’d adapted immediately and swapped to a two-handed grip to meet the stat requirements for one of his swords again, but at least this meant he wouldn’t be dual-wielding. Nirva had a ton of powerful unique skills, but most of them required dual-wielding to use. In fact, I suspected aside from his super fast basic Art, Flash Cutter, and his self-healing skill, Burning Vigor, he had lost access to all of his unique skills.

“Hmph, petty tricks will get you nowhere. But I admire your dedication.”

Nirva still seemed confident he could win, but as I stepped into the ring and flung my cloak back, he blinked in surprise. A second later his expression grew furious.

“How dare you! You intend to challenge me with that equipment?! Stop messing around!”

This too, was within my expectations. After all, I wasn’t wearing heavy armor typical of a warrior. No—I had on a circlet that gave almost no defensive stats, and armor that was clearly meant for

mages. The biggest insult of all though, was that I was dual-wielding magical rods, while Nirva had been forced to abandon his dual-wielding style.

“I assure you, I’m not messing around.”

You see, the Spirit Duel recalculated your stats based on your base growths and your current class. In which case, there was no need for me to stick to the Swordsman build Rex was saddled with at the start.

I thought back to what Radd had said earlier: “Knowing you, Master Rex, I bet you’d be able to find some crazy way to maximize the power of those two weapons. That’s just how you are.” His words gave me strength, and I pointed my Fell Crimson Rod at Nirva. He’d belittled my disciples, but it was one of those very disciples who had given me the hint I’d needed to beat this pompous Blademaster.

“This weapon will be your downfall, just you watch!”

For my duel against Nirva, I’d class changed into Lunatic Leo. The very same class with extremely lopsided stat growths that you could only become by equipping the Lunatic Circlet dropped by the Elder Lich. Lunatic Leo added +7 to your Intelligence growth rate, which was a bigger boost than any other class in the game gave to that stat. Furthermore, the Lunatic Circlet itself increased your Intelligence growth rates significantly in return for heavily nerfing your Mind growth. Intelligence was Rex’s only good innate growth rate, and combined with the Lunatic Leo class and the Lunatic Circlet, I had a whopping Intelligence growth of +12! Granted, the Fell Crimson Rod lowered your Intelligence growth, so in reality I only had a +11 Intelligence boost per level, but that was still huge.

I also had the Shooting-Star Ring, which I’d won at the casino. It boosted your Agility by 150, but reduced your Agility growth rate by a little. Finally, the armor I’d chosen was a Mage Knight’s Heavy Armor, which boosted MP more than it boosted Defense. As a result, my stats currently looked like this:

【Rex】

LV: 25

HP: 140

MP: 500

Strength: 240 (B-)

Vitality: 30 (D-)

Intelligence: 330 (B+)

Mind: 0 (F)

Agility: 150 (B-)

Focus: 30 (D-)

Yes! These are the stats I needed!

Of course, because I'd made my growth rates lopsided, my defensive stats were abysmal. But if I fought Nirva head-on, I'd lose no matter how high I made my defense. For the kind of match I was envisioning, defense was useless anyway, which was why I'd focused all of my growths on offense. As a result, despite being only level 25, both my Strength and Intelligence were higher than they were for me at level 50. My Intelligence especially was quite high, ranking all the way up at B+.

See, if I reassign my growths properly even Rex can become pretty strong. When it comes to offense, I should be able to match up against even the utterly broken Nirva...

I gritted my teeth as I Analyzed Nirva and looked at his stats.

【Nirva】

LV: 25

HP: 860

MP: 160

Strength: 390 (A-)

Vitality: 390 (A-)

Intelligence: 120 (C-)

Mind: 180 (C+)

Agility: 330 (B+)

Focus: 210 (C+)

Well, I'm not done yet!

I still needed to equip my stat-boosting enchanted rings. I equipped one Agility Ring to deal with Nirva's speed, then two Intelligence Rings, bringing me to my final stat totals:

【Rex】

LV: 25

HP: 140

MP: 696

Strength: 240 (B-)

Vitality: 30 (D-)

Intelligence: 526 (A+)

Mind: 0 (F)

Agility: 238 (B-)

Focus: 30 (D-)

At long last my Intelligence was greater than Nirva's Strength and Vitality, his best stats.

How's that! Now you'll have to admit I'm not a weakling, Nirva! I turned expectantly to Nirva, but he just gave me a cold look.

"What a farce. Let's get this over with."

Nirva stepped forward into the starting position for the duel. Irrked by his dismissive attitude, I also stepped forward into my starting position.

As I stared Nirva down, a shiver ran down my spine. *Wait, was he always this huge?*

My vision swam, and I started seeing double and even triple. My heart was racing. Sweat slicked my palms, and I readjusted my grip on my rods numerous times. Prana and Mana, who were cheering me on from the sidelines, looked like they were miles away.

No! Don't let yourself be overwhelmed by his presence!

I shook my head and refocused my attention. Blademaster or not, Nirva was still human. He was made of the same flesh and blood as Rex. Besides, no matter how overpowered a bastard Nirva was, no matter how naturally gifted he was when it came to fighting, even he couldn't know about the full potential of a weapon that dropped from a boss of one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness.

I can do this! I can beat him!

Then, the whistle that signaled the start of the match blared, cutting through my panicked thoughts.

I-It's started!

I hurriedly dropped into a stance, still not mentally prepared for the fight. But to my surprise...

He's...not moving?

Nirva simply held his sword at the ready, making no move to attack. The look in his eyes made it clear he was letting me have the first attack. When I realized he was underestimating me, I started fuming.

You're gonna regret underestimating me, you bastard!

I furiously pointed the rod in my left hand at Nirva. The staff was a Fire Rod. It was similar to the Fell Crimson Rod and Red Flare Rod in that anyone could use the weapon to cast a spell even if they didn't know that particular spell. The difference was, this was a basic weapon sold in most stores. It didn't give much Intelligence, and the spell you could cast by using it was the beginner Fire spell. Normally, it would be the height of folly to challenge the world's strongest fighter with such a weak spell.

"Fire!" I shouted, and a massive fireball bigger even than the ones cast by veteran Mages hurtled toward Nirva.

You see, this was the true power of the Lunatic Circlet. As a reminder, the item description for the circlet read as such:

Those who wear this circlet will be granted immeasurable magical power, but mortals will eventually have their minds corrupted. Equipping it forces the Insane status effect on the user.

The Insane status effect doubles your magical power, but reduces your magical defense to zero. Furthermore, when casting a spell there is a 50% chance your mana goes berserk, and you take damage equal to the spell's power.

In other words, even though it made your magic attacks stronger, it also made it so that half the time your magic would kill you instead. Most people would read that and assume the Lunatic Circlet was a worthless item. However, there was a loophole you could exploit. The 50% chance to backfire only applied to spells the caster chanted themselves. In other words, spells that originated from weapons like the Fire Rod had no risk of backfiring. They still benefited from the damage boost the Lunatic Circlet gave, though.

“Take this!”

Thanks to the Insane buff, I was able to get a truly devastating fireball out of the basic Fire spell. It headed straight for Nirva, who made no move to dodge.

“Pathetic.”

Nirva slashed down with his sword, and a second later the fireball split in two.

“He cut through a spell?” Prana muttered in shock.

Normally, such a thing wasn't possible, but Nirva accomplished that nigh-impossible feat with ease, then returned his sword to its original position, as if waiting to see what else I could throw at him.

I knew that would happen. I knew, but...

Nirva's weapon was the Magebane Greatsword. As the name implied, it was the bane of all mages and allowed him to literally cut through spells. Half-assed magic couldn't even touch the Blademaster.

But that's precisely why I chose the Fire Rod for my left-hand weapon!

If Nirva could cut through any spell, then I'd just have to overwhelm him with numbers.

“Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!”

I threw out fireball after fireball, deftly moving the rod around to attack him from a plethora of different angles. I tried to make my attacks as unpredictable as possible. However, it was all meaningless. Unfazed by the barrage, Nirva skillfully cut down only the fireballs that would hit him, and ignored the rest.

Goddamnit, this guy's way too strong! Am I going to have to do...it?

I glanced down at the rod in my right hand. The Fell Crimson Rod

was capable of unleashing a spell that was far more powerful than just Fire. However, it took three seconds to charge that spell up. If Nirva attacked me during that time, I'd be done for.

No, I can't afford to hesitate! Casting all these Fire spells is depleting my MP. If I keep this up for too long and run out of mana, Nirva will think I'm out of offensive options, which will lead to my defeat!

I thrust the Fell Crimson Rod forward and started gathering mana.
Please, let me finish this cast!

Of course, I continued throwing out fireballs with the Fire Rod while I was charging. I needed to keep him occupied so he didn't notice what I was doing. In order to facilitate that I threw out Fire spells in such a way as to obstruct his vision as much as possible.

Come on! Come on! Yes!

It seemed the smoke screen worked. Either that, or he willingly let me charge up. Whichever it was, it didn't matter. What mattered was that the spell was ready. There was no longer any need to rush.

I carefully took aim with the Fell Crimson Rod and shouted, "Crimson Inferno!"

An explosion of mana that sounded like a dragon's roar burst from the tip of the rod. A blistering blaze erupted from the rod, heading straight toward Nirva. The Fell Crimson Rod's item description likened the spell built into it to dragonbreath, and it was indeed that powerful. The spell seemed strong enough to burn the entire world.

Nirva remained unmoving though as the white-hot flames rushed toward him. "So this is the best you can do?"

Just like that, the world was cleaved in two. For a moment, I wasn't able to process what had just happened.

"Huh...?"

I'd increased my Intelligence as much as possible, used the most powerful magic boosting equipment there was, and cast one of the strongest spells. And yet, Nirva had cut through it in a single stroke. I watched as my spell helplessly dispersed into nothing, but my brain still refused to accept that he'd beaten the Crimson Inferno that easily.

"He's a monster..." I muttered.

Nirva looked at me like I was some pitiful insect and said, "It seems this is as far as you go." He then leaned forward, preparing to attack for the very first time. Raising his sword up high, he said, "Flash Cutter!"

Nirva moved so fast I couldn't even track him. Before I knew it, he was right in front of my face.

In that instant, the match was decided. And, as Nirva mercilessly brought his blade down...there was a sudden metallic clang.

"What?"

Nirva stared down in surprise at the rod in my left hand, which I'd

used to deflect his attack. Seeing his shocked face brought me an immense amount of satisfaction.

“Arts turn prodigies into fools,” I remembered.

It certainly hadn’t been easy to parry Nirva’s attack when he’d been moving at the speed of light. In fact, it had only been possible because I’d been killed by that exact Art, Flash Cutter, dozens of times in the game, and practiced parrying it hundreds of times more.

You see, my goal from the very start had been to get Nirva to use it. The reason I’d dual-wielded rods, gone for a full magic build, and spammed spells at Nirva was to distract him from the possibility that I could parry his attack. All of this had been a smoke screen to hide the fact that I had a weapon I could parry with in my left hand, and a ploy to make him use Flash Cutter as his first move.

My parry created a once-in-a-lifetime opening. Nirva’s stance crumbled, and I thrust the rod in my right hand at him. However, despite his surprise, Nirva still didn’t seem worried. The temporary stiffening that was caused by being parried lasted only a split second. He probably thought I wouldn’t be able to cast a spell in that short time frame, or that even if I could he’d be able to survive one hit at least.

See, you’re underestimating me way too much.

I knew how strong Nirva was better than anyone else. I knew a simple spell wouldn’t be able to beat him. I poured all the mana I had left into my Fell Crimson Rod, and it began to glow.

“Impossible!” Nirva cried, having finally caught on to my plan. His voice trembled.

You see, items that broke during a duel didn’t come back after the duel was over. Which was precisely why not even the Invincible Blademaster himself could have predicted I’d go this far.

I hope you’re ready for my ultimate trump card, Blademaster. Taste the power of 1,000,000,000 wen!

“Final Break!” I shouted, the name of the skill which unleashed a devastating attack in return for destroying your equipped weapon.

Another explosion of mana burst from the rod, and my vision went white. The sheer amount of force contained in this Final Break made even dragonbreath seem like it was nothing. That being said, had Nirva been prepared he might have been able to avoid this trump card of mine. Or perhaps his Magebane Greatsword was capable of cutting through even an attack like this. But the consequences of being parried had left the Invincible Blademaster nothing more than a sitting duck. The white light blotted out Nirva’s figure, but I didn’t miss the look of fear that crossed his face at the very last second.

“Well...done!”

A second after Nirva’s words of praise reached me, the buzzer

signaling the end of the Spirit Duel sounded. At long last, I had brought down the Invincible Blademaster, the strongest character who none had ever defeated.



Chapter 8: Priceless Words

The duel was over.

I looked down at my now-empty right hand and let out a sigh.

That was way too close.

In-game, it was highly likely that Nirva would open the duel with Flash Cutter. Flash Cutter was the weakest of his unique skills, but it let him immediately appear in front of his foe, which threw them off-balance and was liable to finish them in one go if they weren't ready for it. Especially since his stats were so high, he didn't exactly need a super powerful Art to burn through most people's HP.

When I'd first fought him, Nirva had killed me in less than two seconds with that move, and I'd thought this game was unfair garbage. But as I attempted to best him over and over, I began to realize the Flash Cutter Nirva used at the start of most fights was actually my best and perhaps only chance to beat him.

Nirva attacked fast, and was a dual-wielding master. A lot of his more powerful unique skills couldn't be guarded or parried, and in a straight-up brawl your character lost ten times out of ten. That was precisely why most people went with the "parry his first Flash Cutter and hit him with two petrifying weapons in the hopes that the low percent chance procs" strategy. Incidentally, you could pull off that strategy with a character at any level, but if Nirva didn't use Flash Cutter as his first move or if your petrify didn't trigger, you were 100% dead.

In-game, Nirva had almost always used Flash Cutter immediately when I'd fought him with a magic-heavy character. But of course he'd been a preprogrammed NPC in the game, whereas here he was an actual person with thoughts and feelings. I'd tried to make my build as lopsided as possible to goad him into going for the immediate Flash Cutter, but to my surprise he'd let me attack a few times just to show off the difference in strength between us. Fortunately, he'd gone with Flash Cutter as his first move still when he finally had decided to attack, so I'd managed to win in the end.

As I reflected on the outcome of the duel, I heard footsteps approaching me.

"Nirva..." I said, straightening my back as I turned to face the world's strongest fighter. Now that the duel was over, he was back to having his ridiculously broken stats. The only reason I'd managed to

beat Nirva this time around was because I'd dragged him into a Spirit Duel, where he was significantly weaker.

You see, Final Break was a skill whose damage was solely dependent on the quality of the weapon that was sacrificed for it. It wasn't at all affected by the user's stats. That meant it was comparatively stronger the lower the level of the combatants involved. I'd managed to one-shot a level 25 Nirva with it, but I suspected a full-strength level 70 Nirva wouldn't have died. In fact, he might not even have taken any real damage. My strategy had only been effective because of the special restrictions of our duel.

But that was just fine—the point of this duel had been to show my future potential to Nirva. *Still, I wonder if he'll really think I have any potential at all considering the underhanded tricks I used to beat him...*

As I waited nervously for his verdict, Nirva suddenly smiled. "Why do you look so scared? Regardless of how you accomplished it, the fact remains that you defeated me. Hold your head high. You showed more mettle than anyone else I've fought. I admit that I was wrong about you. You truly are strong."

"Ah..."

I'd heard those words from Nirva a few times before, in the game version of *BB*.

"Who knows," Nirva continued. "Perhaps you have the potential to truly master the blade. Few can survive the harsh trials that await on that path, but I sense something special from you."

This was word for word the same speech Nirva gave if you managed to beat him in-game. However, I felt far more fulfilled hearing those same words from Nirva now than I ever had in the game.

I really did it! I thought, clenching my fist in elation.

I squeezed so hard my nails were digging into my skin, but in the moment, the pain felt good. Until now, I'd felt like I'd been wasting my time trying to make Rex stronger, but now I knew all the effort I'd put in had been worth it. Being able to hear those words meant so much to me. Honestly, I didn't even mind that I'd needed to sacrifice a valuable boss drop to make it happen.

Nirva stared at me for a few more minutes, then turned to Prana. "As promised, I will bother you no further. However..."

Is he not willing to give up just yet?

I gave Nirva a wary look, but to my surprise, he lowered his voice and whispered to me, "I sensed faint traces of evil energy from that girl earlier. Make sure you keep an eye on her."

"Huh?"

That was not what I'd been expecting, and I stared at Nirva, dumbfounded. But it seemed he had nothing more to say to us; he

turned his back and started walking out of the coliseum without further ado.

Hang on...

In *Braves and Blades*, Nirva didn't show up much during a normal playthrough. In fact, the only time the protagonist could run into him outside of the duel that triggered when you won the world's strongest fighter tournament or his appearance before you entered the final Ruin of Darkness was when you first visited the coliseum. There was a scene where you passed by Nirva at the entrance and all the NPCs whispered excitedly about how that was the undefeated lord of the coliseum, introducing Nirva to the player. I'd sunk a good amount of time into *BB* and even I didn't really know much about Nirva's personality or background. I'd been wary of him because of Prana's attitude toward him, but now that I'd gotten to know him better, I had a feeling he was actually a pretty nice guy under his brusque exterior. Of course, I could be totally off-base, but my instincts told me that estimation was correct. Which was why I decided to call out to him.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Nirva looked over his shoulder, giving me a puzzled look. "What is it? Our business is concluded, isn't it?"

I wordlessly drew my sword. If I was being honest, I was a bit conflicted. I realized what I was about to do could have some serious ramifications. But at the same time, I felt as though this was the right thing to do.

I slowly poured mana into my blade and shouted, "V-Slash!"

I'd traced this arc hundreds of thousands of times, to the point where I could do it in my sleep. This was the most basic Art, one that every single swordsman knew. However, I'd activated the Art manually.

Seeing what I'd done, Nirva burst out laughing. "Aha...ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

It's refreshing seeing him laugh without reservation, I found myself thinking. Normally, Nirva's expressions were more muted.

After a few minutes his laughter subsided and Nirva grinned at me, looking happier than I'd ever seen him. "You have my thanks, Rex. I promise to one day repay you for giving me such a valuable boon."

Eyes glimmering with unbridled excitement, Nirva once again turned his back on us and walked out of the arena.

As soon as Nirva was out of sight, Prana and Mana ran over to me from the spectator stands.

"Rex!" Prana cried, her voice uncharacteristically exuberant.

At nearly the same time, Mana shouted, "You did it, Rex!"

The two girls were so overcome by emotion that when they reached my side, they both leapt forward and hugged me.

"Whoa!" I said, stumbling a little from their combined weight.

"You were amazing, Rex!" Mana exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. "I can't believe you managed to beat the Invincible Blademaster! I've never seen anything like it!"

"Indeed. Thank you for protecting me," Prana said, trying to sound more dignified.

For once, I didn't feel like a fraud when she looked at me with such admiration. Though everything had started from a misunderstanding, I still felt proud that I'd been able to protect my precious disciple. A few seconds later, though, Mana's expression grew worried.

"Umm, are you sure that was a good idea though?" she asked hesitantly.

I had a guess as to what she was referring to.

"You mean sacrificing the rod? Well..."

It was true that I'd lost a unique item worth 1,000,000,000 wen, but I'd already accepted that as a worthwhile trade.

"Err, there's that as well, but..." Mana shook her head and added, "That skill you showed Nirva just now. That was a manual Art, wasn't it? Are you sure you should have done that?"

Though she was a mage, Mana had seen me and Radd use manual Arts enough times to recognize them. The fact that I'd shown one to Nirva meant that I had opened his eyes to the existence of manual Arts, and effectively taught him how to use them.

"There's no way to know for sure," I admitted.

A swordsman of Nirva's caliber had probably been able to glean a huge amount of information from just seeing me use V-Slash once. Who knew how much he'd evolve once he mastered manual activation and started incorporating it into his fighting style. Nirva's Blademaster class was already extremely strong, but it was also the class that synergized best with manual Arts activation. Especially since it had the Twin Arts skill, which copied the effects of any skill or Art you activated with your main hand to your off hand as well. Twin Arts worked with manual Art activation as well, so you could do some truly crazy things there. There was no telling how strong Nirva would be the next time I saw him.

"Still...I think it was the right choice," I added after a few seconds of contemplation.

I was done feeling sorry for myself whenever I compared my stats to other people. I'd decided from the start that I'd help make everyone in the world stronger to beat the final boss together with them. Of

course, I'd felt conflicted about that, because it would mean giving up the few advantages I had over everyone else, but now that I'd beaten Nirva I wasn't worried anymore.

I guess that's pretty shallow of me, but that's fine.

Shallow or not, now that Nirva had recognized my strength I no longer had an inferiority complex regarding my abilities. Besides, Nirva would have learned about manual Arts eventually regardless.

"Nirva's going to see Radd use manual Arts in the tournament anyway," I pointed out.

"O-Oh yes, I suppose he will."

Truthfully, if anything, I was far more concerned about Nirva's parting words. I peered at Prana, and she gave me a wary look.

"Rex...?" she asked, confused.

A few moments ago, Nirva had said he'd sensed "faint traces of evil energy" from Prana. Normally you'd expect that to be the trigger to some kind of event or something, but...

The problem is, these guys shouldn't have any special events tied to them.

As far as the game version of *BB* was concerned, Prana, Mana, Radd, and Nyuuk were just randomly generated starter adventurers who were given slightly better growths than average. Indeed, during my second run through *BB*, my starting party had characters who all filled their roles, though their names had been different. I'd kept them in my party all the way until I reached the normal ending, but they hadn't gotten any special events or character developments that whole time. I couldn't think of any event that started with one of your party members randomly emitting traces of evil energy either.

The only thing we did that might be related is killing the boss of one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness, I mused. All twelve of those bosses are dark-aspected, so it's theoretically possible that some of the Elder Lich's energy transferred to Prana upon his death.

But in that case, why had it only happened to Prana and not the rest of us?

Well, I guess there's no point in speculating when I have no clues to work with.

I decided to just keep watch over Prana as much as possible, and gave up on trying to unravel the mystery for now.

"By the way, shouldn't we be heading back soon, Rex?" Mana asked, still looking excitedly up at me.

I shook my head and replied, "Sorry, but could you two head back before me? I need to go change classes again first."

"Oh, I guess you can't stay as a Lunatic Leo, huh? Got it!" Mana said, nodding.

Prana grinned at me. "Don't worry, we'll let the boys know all

about your epic duel.”

“U-Umm, actually can you please keep today’s duel a secret?” I muttered.

Recilia would just get worried if she found out what had happened, and Radd would try even harder to get me to participate in the tournament.

“What a shame. I was looking forward to bragging about how cool you were,” Prana said with a sigh.

Nevertheless, she thankfully agreed to keep my fight with Nirva a secret, and soon the two girls were on their way. I smiled wryly to myself as I watched them go.

“Now then...”

I slowly walked out of the arena, each step measured and deliberate.

Sorry for lying to you guys, I thought.

I felt bad about sending them off literally right after I’d promised myself to keep a closer eye on Prana, but I’d wanted to savor this particular victory alone.

After a few minutes, I finally exited the coliseum building, then turned around to face the stone statue situated at the entrance. *We meet again, first champion of the coliseum.*

This man was Nirva’s ancestor, and the ultimate swordsman who’d reigned as the undefeated king of the coliseum for thirty years. He looked quite formidable, and the way he was brandishing his twin swords reminded me of Nirva.

I recalled what Nirva had said just before leaving the arena: “I promise to one day repay you for giving me such a valuable boon.”

The truth is, you’ve already given me the greatest gift of all, I thought to him. *If anything, what I showed you is only enough to repay a fraction of it. It would take a lot more than that to make up for what I’d received.*

I looked up at the statute of the world’s strongest hero, the true champion of the coliseum. This was exactly the kind of person I’d idolized for so long—the exact kind of person I’d always wanted to become. But until today, until I’d met Nirva, I’d given up on ever reaching such heights. I suspected Nirva would never understand how I felt. He’d been born a Blademaster, so he probably had no idea just how happy I’d been to be recognized by him.

I took a deep breath, then finally cast Analyze.

【Statue】

LV: 0

HP: 420

MP: 75
Strength: 195 (C+)
Vitality: 195 (C+)
Intelligence: 60 (D)
Mind: 90 (D+)
Agility: 165 (C)
Focus: 105 (C-)

The statue's stats were pretty low for the famed hero who'd been stronger than anyone, but the stat spread and ratio, but I could tell at a glance that they were the exact same as Nirva's. That was no coincidence, of course.

Feeling a sense of excitement welling up within me, I reached out toward the statue. As my trembling fingers touched the cool stone, the world was filled with light. Or rather, I started emitting light that blotted out my vision.

Feeling a surge of strength that hadn't been there before, I softly called out to the man I'd bested in a duel. "Hey, Nirva..."

【Blademaster】 :

A class only those who have mastered the way of the sword can lay claim to. It boasts some of the strongest close combat skills, and specializes in one-on-one duels. Class Change Requirements: defeat Nirva in a one-on-one duel, and obtain the title "Sword Seeker."

Stat Bonuses on Level Up: Strength +6, Vitality +6, Intelligence +2, Mind +2, Agility +5, Focus +3.
Total: 24

"Thanks for the valuable boon."

Chapter 9: Epilogue

“Nirva! Nirva! Nirva! Nirva!”

The cheers of the crowd shook the entire coliseum.

Man, he’s super popular, I thought, watching the crowd impassively from my seat in the corner of the stands.

Nirva the Invincible Blademaster—a man who had appeared in the coliseum scene out of the blue one day. After defeating the current champion of the coliseum in his very first battle, he’d never lost a single fight, and continued to reign over the coliseum as its ultimate king to this day.

Now that I think about it, it’s insane that I was able to beat someone like that.

A few days had passed since our duel, and I was once again reminded that the guy truly was the strongest fighter in the world. Nirva didn’t have some half-assed “strongest at the start of the game” kind of thing going on like Rex—at level 70, his stats were second to none. I’d only managed to beat him because we’d been fighting a Spirit Duel, and because I’d managed to goad him into using Flash Cutter first so I could parry him, and because I’d been willing to sacrifice a unique boss weapon, the Fell Crimson Rod, to deal decisive damage to him. It wasn’t the kind of victory I’d ever be able to replicate, but a win was a win. Nirva had accepted his defeat, and I’d earned the qualifications to class change into Blademaster.

Though as a result, I’m completely uninterested in this tournament now, I thought.

I hadn’t been really keen on entering to begin with, but after the fight with Nirva there hadn’t been any benefits from my doing so at all. Other than stopping Radd’s nagging, of course, but that still hadn’t been enough to make me budge.

After all, the biggest reward for winning the tournament was getting to fight Nirva, and the reward for beating him was access to the Blademaster class. Since I’d already acquired that class due to an unexpected encounter, I had zero desire to fight in the tournament.

That being said, this was still Radd and the others’ chance to show off how much stronger they’d gotten, so there was no way I’d miss watching my disciple’s matches. I’d been watching the battles from the stands, but there was no need now. The tournament had ended, and only the exhibition match remained. Shortly it would begin, and

Nirva would fight the winner of the tournament, which unfortunately hadn't been Radd. Still, I thought Radd and the others had performed quite well. Everyone had at least won their first battle, though Nyuuk and Mana had lost their second bout. Prana had put up a good fight, but she'd been given a series of bad matchups, and eventually lost in the quarterfinals. As for Radd...

"Brother..." Recilia tugged at my sleeve, and I looked up to see Radd coming over to where we were sitting. He tried to keep his expression neutral, but eventually he gave up and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry, Master Rex! Even though you taught me so many special techniques, I still lost."

I could tell he was serious, since he was calling me Master Rex instead of old man, and I heartily patted him on the back. "What are you apologizing for? You should be proud—you proved you're the third strongest person in the world."

Indeed, Radd had lasted the longest out of the members of *Braves and Blades*. Despite being pitted against some of the fiercest fighters in the tournament, he'd fought his way all the way to the finals. Sadly he'd been defeated in the final match, but that was an impressive record for someone who'd started adventuring just two months ago, and the fact that he wasn't satisfied despite accomplishing such a feat showed how strong his desire to improve was.

Plus, while the Tournament of the World's Strongest might be a pretty dumb, on-the-nose name, but there were few sources of entertainment in this world, and the tournament was as popular as the Olympics were back in my world. Once word of Radd's feat spread, no one would doubt that these four were some of the best adventurers out there.

"Th-That's right! You did really well, Radd!" Mana exclaimed, trying to cheer Radd up.

"How dare you get depressed despite winning more than me," Prana added.

I presumed that was her way of trying to encourage Radd.

Nyuuk, meanwhile, looked his friend straight in the eyes and said in a calm voice, "I understand why you're frustrated. Watching the match from up here your opponent definitely seemed like someone you could beat. In the end though, he was just a little bit better. You'll get him next time though. We're going to keep on getting stronger from here on out."

Nyuuk had spent the longest time with Radd, and his words seemed to strike a chord with the young swordsman.

"Yeah, that's right..." Radd agreed, nodding to himself. "We need to get way stronger."

Looking more at peace, Radd took the empty seat next to me. He

looked down at the arena, where the man who'd defeated him—Sergen—stood. He was a renowned general, and known by the moniker the Unshakable Wall. Using Analyze, I peered at the man's stats.

【Sergen】

LV: 55

HP: 840

MP: 180

Strength: 350 (B+)

Vitality: 350 (B+)

Intelligence: 110 (C-)

Mind: 255 (B-)

Agility: 145 (C)

Focus: 170 (C)

Sergen wasn't quite as insanely powerful as Nirva, but he had both much better stats and a higher level than Rex, who was known as the strongest early-game character. Normally, you'd expect a general to be a better strategist and commander than a fighter, but it was a common RPG trope that generals were the strongest fighters in their army.

Sergen was a pretty prominent side character who showed up in a lot of events that included large-scale battles. He'd interacted a lot with the player in *BB* the game, so I was pretty familiar with him.

Curious, I used Analyze again to compare Radd's stats to Sergen's.

【Radd】

LV: 32

HP: 724

MP: 158

Strength: 300 (B)

Vitality: 315 (B)

Intelligence: 111 (C-)

Mind: 241 (B-)

Agility: 232 (B-)

Focus: 195 (C+)

Surprisingly, Radd wasn't that much weaker than the general. And right now he wasn't wearing his equipment, so if we included his enchanted accessories, almost all of his stats would be just a little bit higher than Sergen's.

"I got the feeling I wasn't losing to him in raw stats. I just didn't have the combat experience to match him," Radd muttered in

disappointment.

I shook my head. “It’s true that he had more experience than you, but you managed to stay on even footing against him despite that. You’ve truly grown, Radd.”

“Wha...?! D-Don’t just spout sappy shit like that all of a sudden, old man!”

Radd shook his head, flustered, but I wasn’t exaggerating here. He truly had become quite powerful. They’d been roughly even when it came to stats, but Sergen had better equipment and more combat experience. Despite that, Radd had acquitted himself well. He’d made full use of the one advantage he had over Sergen, his ability to use manual Arts, and succeeded in putting Sergen on the back foot during a few exchanges. Had the battle continued without any changes, it would have genuinely been difficult to call who would have won.

“However, there’s one last important factor when it comes to rating overall strength,” I pointed out. “Your level.”

“Wait, but didn’t you say...” Radd cocked his head in confusion.

His reaction made sense, considering I’d been teaching them all this time that they needed to raise their stats as much as possible with as little level ups as possible. It made sense to then think that someone with a higher level but the same stats as someone with a lower level wouldn’t be that much stronger.

“Just watch. You’ll see.”

A picture—or a demonstration, in this case—was worth a thousand words. I looked back down at the arena, just in time to see Nirva entering the ring. The crowd’s cheers reached a fever pitch, and I looked down at the imposing swordsman I’d met just once a few days before. He left such a strong impression that it was impossible to forget any part of his features.

【Nirva】

LV: 70

HP: 2120

MP: 385

Strength: 975 (SS)

Vitality: 975 (SS)

Intelligence: 300 (B)

Mind: 450 (A-)

Agility: 825 (S+)

Focus: 525 (A+)

As always, a shiver ran down my spine as I stared at Nirva’s stats. General Sergen was strong, but Nirva was on a whole different level.

Still, Sergen didn’t balk when Nirva stepped into the ring. In fact,

he glared ferociously at his opponent and shouted, “Blademaster! You may be strong, but today is the day I knock you off your throne! As the leader of an army, I can’t afford to lose here!”

With a roar, Sergen launched forward. Despite his graying hair, he moved with the speed of someone half his age. In-game, there was a scene where Sergen told the protagonist about how he didn’t want the people of the military to fall behind adventurers or coliseum fighters since it was a Soldier’s job to be the shield that protects the people. That was in fact why it vexed him so much that the title of strongest belonged to Nirva and not a Soldier like him.

“Watch closely, Radd,” I said. It wasn’t just fighting spirit that was propelling Sergen forward. Mana surged from his body and he shouted, “Unyielding!” The mana coalesced into a glowing aura that wrapped around him.

“H-He did that before too! When I was fighting him he was suddenly enveloped in light and got a lot stronger!” Radd exclaimed.

I nodded. “That’s General Sergen’s trump card. It’s his unique skill. Unique skills are something only certain people can learn, and only once they reach a certain level.”

“Those exist?”

“Yeah, leveling up doesn’t just make your stats go up. Certain people, and members of certain races acquire unique skills only they can use after reaching a certain level.”

Rex’s extremely hard to use dark element skill, Sinner’s Cross, was also a unique skill. However, the unique skills that were truly great were buff skills like Sergen’s. Damage-based unique skills generally had at least one Art or spell counterpart that functioned somewhat similarly, but buff skills were a lot rarer. Sergen’s Unyielding skill was a buff that lasted only one minute, and after the buff wore off he was immobilized for a short while. In return for that glaring drawback though, the buff itself was immense. It raised his Attack by one and a half times and tripled his Defense. That was why he’d been able to overwhelm Radd so easily. The buff was powerful enough that it let him go toe to toe against enemies he’d normally not stand a chance against.

Sergen let out another roar and charged forward, bringing my attention back to the duel playing out before me. The frontal assault was probably the right move—Sergen needed to stay on the offensive and end the match as quickly as possible. Unyielding gave him a huge boost, but once his minute was up he’d be rendered immobile and lose for sure. Most people were probably thinking the match would be decided based on whether or not Sergen could land a decisive blow within the time limit, or if Nirva would manage to hold Sergen off for the duration of the buff. But of course, I knew that Nirva wasn’t that

weak.

With a spirited shout, Sergen swung his weapon down with all his might. Nirva responded by moving both of his swords in a strange pattern. Or rather, a pattern that probably seemed strange to everyone but me. I could immediately tell that was actually the starting motions for two different Arts—Thunderclap, and Moonlight Dance.

It happened in an instant. The moment Sergen's weapon was about to make contact with Nirva, Nirva's two swords shot out. The battle was decided immediately. Despite the tripled defense that Sergen had, he was sent flying and slammed into the ground at high speed. He lay in the center of the arena, unmoving. Knowing that Sergen wouldn't be getting up from that, Nirva sheathed his two blades, then turned to the referee.

After a moment, the man finally remembered his job and shouted, "Th-The winner is Nirva, the coliseum champion!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the crowd erupted into cheers. "*Nirva! Nirva! Nirva! Nirva!*"

The undefeated champion of the coliseum had once again secured an overwhelming victory. Or at least, that was how it looked to the layperson. But those who knew even a little bit about fighting had seen something in Nirva's swordplay that stood out to them.

"H-Hey. Did he just..."

"I... I think so."

Amidst the cheers, you could hear warriors muttering to each other in awe. Honestly, even I was surprised, so you'd expect the average adventurer who knew far less than me to be absolutely floored.

"P-Please wait!" one of the coliseum commentators shouted at Nirva, who was leisurely making his way to the exit. "L-Let me first congratulate you on your splendid victory!"

"It was the expected result. I haven't slacked in my training, after all," Nirva said bluntly.

The commentator didn't seem to mind the brusqueness though. "O-Of course! But, forgive me if I'm mistaken, for the attack you used to end the match, did you...?" The commentator sucked in a breath, then said with conviction, "It seemed to me that you used different Arts at the same time with your left and right hand weapons."

Using two Arts at once was something only the player could do in-game. At the very least, I'd never seen an NPC do it. But of course, that was exactly what Nirva had done. Though there was more to it than just that.

"Yes, that's exactly what I did," Nirva said with a casual nod.

"F-Furthermore, it seemed to me those two Arts were used at a different angle than normal! How on earth did you manage to..." the

man trailed off, pressing Nirva for an answer. He seemed like he was asking more to satisfy his own curiosity than to fulfill his duty as a commentator.

Nirva waved him off, looking mildly irritated. "I learned this technique from a certain swordsman the other day. If you want to know the secret, ask him."

"Wh-What?! Th-There's someone out there who was able to teach you something new?! Just who..."

Despite the distance between us, I could clearly see Nirva's lips curling up into a devilish grin.

"R-Recilia, we need to get out of here right now!" I got to my feet, knowing that something very bad was about to happen. Sadly, I was too late.

"The man who taught me is right over there." Nirva pointed directly at me. "He is the only person in the world who has ever bested me in a one-on-one duel."

Everyone in the coliseum froze upon hearing that.

"Uh, old man?" Radd looked up at me in disbelief.

"What is the meaning of this, brother?" Recilia asked, her voice as cold as ice.

"W-Well, you see..."

Nyuuk was so stunned his glasses had slipped off, and Mana was looking worriedly up at me. Prana, however, seemed to be enjoying the commotion and grinned wickedly at me. The commentator and all of the spectators in the stands turned to me, their expressions a mixture of disbelief and awe.

I-It's not supposed to be like this! I'm not the star of today's show! Goddamnit, why is this happening to me?!

I plastered on a wan smile and cast my gaze across the numerous spectators staring at me.

I'm not the protagonist here! I screamed inside my head.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Usber here!

Did you guys know that most novels set in a video game, or a world derived from a video game, must grapple with one specific trope that's basically become the original sin of the genre? Well, I guess I'm exaggerating a bit here, but I am of course talking about stat sheets. Almost all novels that have video-game-related settings are stuck using them. A lot of readers aren't fans of them, and I often see comments like "Not stat dumps again!" or "Why does a fantasy world need stats at all?" or even "Stop trying to pad your character count with stat pages!" and so on.

If you were to ask me though, there's a more fundamental problem with including stats in your work. Namely that throwing them in half-assed without thinking about the implications of those numbers just causes issues! In one of my previous works (*Only I Know We're Living in a Game World*), the video game superimposed itself on real life, so a lot of standard menu options stopped working, and you stopped being able to see people's stats as numbers. I did that mostly to avoid having to show people's attributes in concrete numbers, but this story has a much more involved relationship with stat numbers, so I couldn't afford to obfuscate them here.

But, as I was writing this story, I had an epiphany! If I made strict rules for how leveling and stats worked in the game and then made the fantasy world work under the game's rules, then I'd be able to avoid a lot of the common pitfalls! I also came up with the genius idea of using spreadsheet software to keep track of everyone's stats and growth rates and levels. That would make it really easy to copy and paste them into stat tables whenever I needed to throw them into the series properly. I thought I'd come up with the perfect plan, but very soon, I realized I'd started walking down the stairway to hell.

For starters, it took forever just to come up with all of the classes that would be featured in the story. All told, I ended up having to come up with 30 different classes, and then I had to come up with their growth rates and class change conditions and all that. It was a real pain. I was keeping track of every character's growth in Excel, but then I realized I could make a lot of functions to help streamline things.

At first, I just thought, *It'd be nice to have a function that calculates*

someone's stats after a level up if you plug in a character's growths and current level. But then I found myself thinking, Since I'm recording all this info anyway, I may as well write a function that tracks everyone's stat totals and averages, and While I'm at it, I should make a function that color codes a person's highest and lowest stats. Once that was done, my thoughts shifted to, Porting over numbers every time I set a new character's stats is such a pain; I should just make a function that automatically copies and pastes them over into a stat table that I can immediately slot into the novel, and then Manually calculating someone's total rank is getting annoying; I might as well make a macro to do it automatically and then Copying over some of this other data is kind of annoying too; I should just make a pull-down menu that lets me pick a character and their class which automatically calculates their stats at any given level for me. That last one I made a note to myself: This one's important.

As you can see, I kept on coming up with more and more things I could do to streamline the process. Unfortunately, I wasn't particularly proficient with Excel. In fact, the only function I was familiar with before starting this journey was the SUM one.

A more experienced person could have probably whipped all of these functions up in five minutes, but I was stuck googling everything and grumbling about how I had no clue what VBA was, or how the hell I was meant to use VLOOKUP. Any time I wanted to add a feature to my spreadsheet, it took five hours instead of five minutes. Some things took even longer than that. I'd fallen into a quagmire of Excel functions!

If any one of you out there is interested in writing a novel with a video game setting, I have one piece of advice for you—just half-ass all the stats! You'll make your life so much easier. Also, if any of you guys are programmers, please make a program that lets you do efficient stat tracking for Naro novels! I promise you people *will* pay for this!

Anyway, as you can see, this novel took a lot of blood, sweat, tears, and VLOOKUP to make, but it took a lot more than just that, so let's move on to the acknowledgments.

First off, I'd like to thank my editors Fda-san and Ykuchi-san. The manga adaptation is starting from this volume on, so there was a lot more work that needed to be done, and I'm thankful for all of your guys' help. I hope you'll keep looking out for me in the volumes to come! I'd also like to thank my illustrator, Amano-san. I know I made a lot of annoying demands when it came to Nirva's design, so thank you so much for your patience and godlike art! You made him look every bit as badass as I was hoping! A big thank you as well to my designer, Kiba-san, who made the great designs for volume 1 and

volume 2's obi. And also thank you to my proofreader, who pointed out all the contradictions I didn't notice when writing the web novel version of *I'm Not the Hero*.

Last but not least, a big thank you to all of my readers out there! May we meet again in the next volume!

Character Introductions

**The Invincible
Blademaster**

Nirva

Nirva first appeared in Freelea several years ago, and he has wholeheartedly devoted himself to the pursuit of strength ever since. He has little interest in anything other than fighting and winning, as exemplified by his undefeated record in Freelea's coliseum. His monstrous strength allows him to dual-wield greatswords that would each normally require two hands to hold.





REX'S SECRET NOTEBOOK

HOW TO LEVEL UP EFFICIENTLY:

In *Braves and Blades*, defeated enemies take a pretty long time to respawn. As a result, you typically will need to travel around the world and explore many different dungeons to efficiently level your character. If that doesn't suit you, however, I've listed below a few ways to farm infinite experience while staying in one place.

THE INFINITE SKELETON EXPLOIT:

The Infinite Skeleton Exploit is probably the most famous farming exploit in *Braves and Blades*. You'll have to travel midway through the Maze of Immortals to use it, to a puzzle room with four sculptures that need to be rotated a certain way to open the door to the next area. If you fail to input the correct solution, the door will remain closed and sixteen skeletons will pop out of the ground and attack you. This means that if you continue to purposely enter the wrong solution, you can spawn skeletons indefinitely.

That said, sixteen skeletons is quite the swarm of monsters to deal with. Thankfully, this can be offset by the fact that undead monsters have easily exploitable weaknesses. All you have to do is prepare some light and fire-aspected spells ahead of time, and you'll be able to handle them even when you're underleveled. You'll be able to use this grinding spot to get all the way up to level 27 without expending too much time, as the skeletons' levels average around 25.

WARNING:

• **DO NOT INPUT THE CORRECT SOLUTION TO THE PUZZLE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.**

If you open the door, the trap deactivates, and you won't be able to spawn any more skeletons.

THE DOMOHOLN LINK METHOD:

There is a certain field area in *Braves and Blades* called Twin Hills, where a rare monster known as the Link Slime sometimes spawns. This is another monster you can utilize to infinitely grind experience. You see, the Link Slime is made up of two slimes joined together, and you get experience for killing just one of the two linked slimes. Furthermore, if you kill just one and then let the remaining slime recover some HP, the second slime will regenerate. You can take advantage of this and avoid having to wait for it to respawn by only killing one of the two halves over and over.

Compared to the Infinite Skeleton Exploit, the Domoholn Link Method is a lot less efficient. Despite this, the fact that the Link Slime is only level 14 and has very basic attack patterns means this is a more accessible method to grind experience for very low-level players.

WARNING:

• THIS METHOD TAKES FOREVER.

There is no way to heal the Link Slime yourself, and their only HP-regenerating move is Quiver, which it has an extremely low chance of using. On top of that, even if the Link Slime does use Quiver, they'd have to use the move five to six times before they'd recover enough HP to regenerate the half of the slime you defeated. The whole process can take anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes, and of course you can't just put your controller down and do something else in the meantime, since the remaining half of the Link Slime will continue to attack you.

It should also be noted that the Link Slime will never grow larger than two slimes, so waiting for it to generate additional slimes will result in failure. Most walkthrough sites agree this method is even more boring than watching paint dry, and don't recommend it.

SECRET

I'M NOT THE HERO!

02



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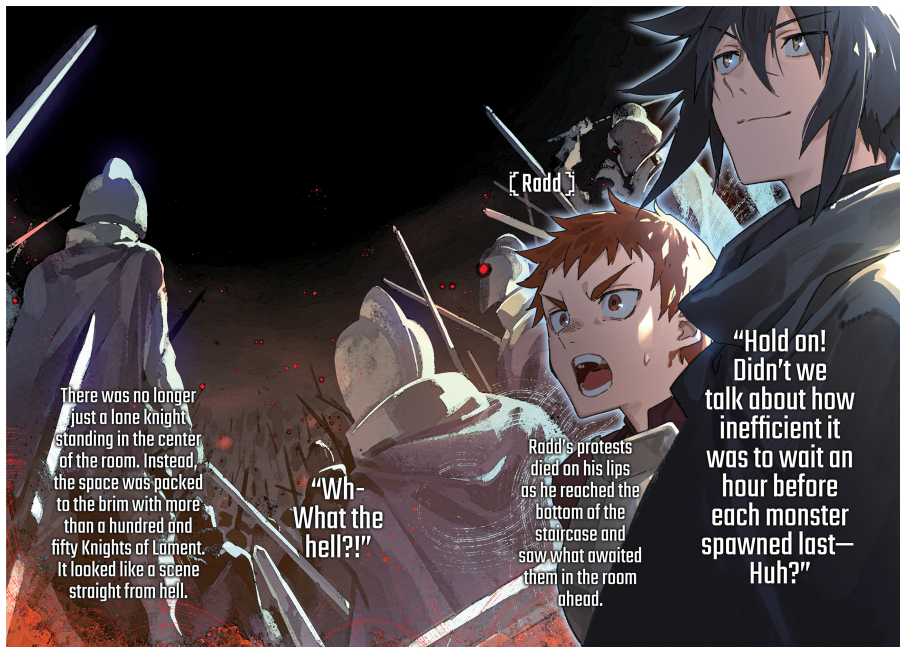
〔Recilio〕

"This is
why I said
you should
have refused
that girl's
request."

〔Rex〕

"No, I think
I made the
right choice.
That was a
pretty valuable
experience for me—
I learned a lot."





There was no longer just a lone knight standing in the center of the room. Instead, the space was packed to the brim with more than a hundred and fifty Knights of Lament. It looked like a scene straight from hell.

“Wh-
What the
hell?!”

[Radd]

Radd's protests died on his lips as he reached the bottom of the staircase and saw what awaited them in the room ahead.

“Hold on!
Didn't we
talk about how
inefficient it
was to wait an
hour before
each monster
spawned last—
Huh?”



[Nirvo]

"You will
never..."

...be able
to match
me."



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I'm Not the Hero! Volume 2

by Usber

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SHUJINKO JANAI! Vol.2

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